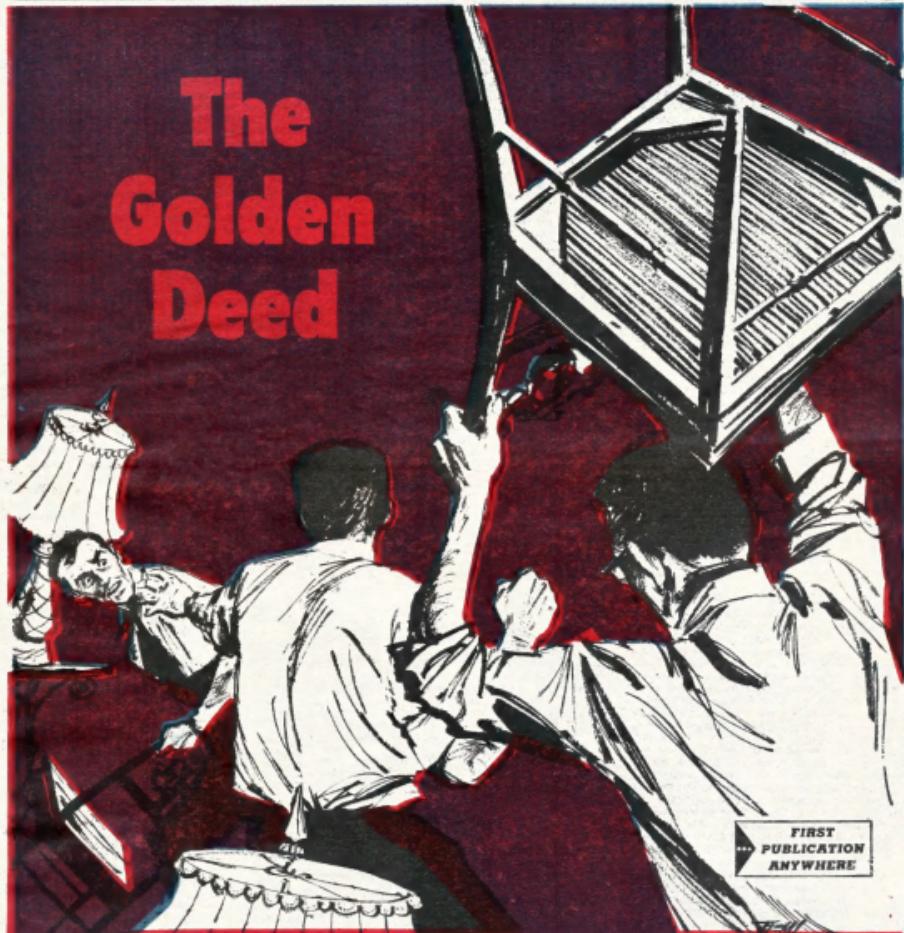


STAR WEEKLY

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# COMPLETE NOVEL

## The Golden Deed



FIRST  
PUBLICATION  
ANYWHERE

The surprise ending of this latest thriller by ANDREW GARVE climaxes  
a story of suspense, as the life of a family is disrupted by a stranger

# The Golden Deed

Illustration by Tom McNeely

THEY might have been any small family party as they made for the Somerset coast that August afternoon. In fact they were the Mellanbys. Sally Mellany was driving the car. She was slim and attractive, with large brown eyes and an expressive face. The jade-green sun dress she had set off the brown in her person. Her dark hair was loose on her shoulders. She looked about 25, but in fact she was 32. Beside her in the car sat six-year-old Alison, curly-haired, observant, and immensely self-posessed. In the back were eight-year-old Tony, a solid, freckled boy in T-shirt and swimming trunks, who sat clutching a partially inflated air bed that he intended to use as a raft, and Kira, Kira's Norwegian girl who had come to Sally as nurse-help for the summer holidays. She was 18, blonde, charming, and very placid, and she fitted perfectly into the lively Mellany household.

The moment Sally stopped the car, Alison was off with her bucket and spade, racing along the familiar dune path to "their place"—a sheltered, grass-covered hollow above the beach. Tony blew more air into his air bed before following her. It was a very old air bed and leaked from the nozzle, but it made a jolly good raft all the same, according to him. Sally and Kira followed, Tony towed the tea-trunk, Alison led the way, and then the children.

At the top of the bank they almost collided with Alison, who was racing back full of indignation. "Mummy," she gasped, "there's a man in our place—a man!"

Sally looked along the sandbank. Above the hollow a pair of swimming trunks had been spread out to dry and an expanse of brown male chest was just visible through the marram grass. "Well, never mind," she said equably, "there are plenty of other places. Even in Australia, there are lots of beach houses, especially along the coast over there." She pointed, and led the way to another little nook. Kira spread the rug and they all changed into their swim suits. Sally said she intended to sun-bathe before going into the water, so Kira took the children down to the sea.

"Keep close to the edge, Tony," Sally called after them. She watched them down to the water, and for a little while afterwards. Kira and Alison stayed in the tiny breaking surf, splashing and laughing. Tony began to paddle his raft slowly up and down with his hands parallel to the shore. A little way out the sea was rippled by the gentle offshore breeze, but where Tony was it was as smooth and calm as a pond.

With a sigh of contentment Sally stretched out full length on the rug, turning her face up to the sun and moving her shoulders until the sand was comfortably packed down beneath them. It was blissfully hot day, the first of summer, and a week. Realizing how warm she thought how lucky she was to be able to take full advantage of it. Really, she had almost too many blessings to count. A devoted husband whom she loved and admired, two delightful children, a beautiful home, no money worries. Leisure enough to make the bringing up of a family wholly enjoyable; leisure to share John's quiet but deep enthusiasm. . . . Soon, though, she might have to give that leisure. . . . Perhaps the time had come to think about another baby. They had decided that two were all they could afford to educate, but that was before John had come into his inheritance.

She sat up as a sudden howl came from the water's edge. Alison was in trouble, and as usual wasn't slow to advertise the fact. Kira was bending down, examining the little girl's foot. Presently he picked her up and started to carry her in up the beach. "A small piece of glass, I think," Kira said, in her careful English.

Sally inspected Alison's toe. "We'll wrap it up—you'll look as if you've got goot."

It was only after several minutes that she noticed Tony. Taking advantage of the diversion, he

had paddled his raft into deep water and was yards from the shore. Sally jumped up and began to run down the beach. "Come back, Tony," she called, "you're much too far out. That's very naughty!" Tony grinned and started to paddle the unwilling craft back. It turned in a circle, but came no nearer. It was almost on the edge of the rippled water, and at the offshore end caught it in the gap suddenly. In a few, well-timed strokes he turned in and began to swim after it. She wasn't much of a swimmer, but she was better than Kira. Anxiety, as well as exertion, took her breath away. She could hear someone calling out on the beach—Kira. She swam on, with desperate, ineffective strokes. The little waves slapped in her face. Suddenly she gulped a mouthful of water and spluttered and went under.

She came up gasping, her clothes soaked, thrashing her arms frantically to try to keep her head out. She had to reach the raft—but it was still yards ahead. . . . Another wave slopped over her and she breathed water and choked helplessly. Fear gripped her. She was going under again. . . . It was incredible, but she was going to drown.

At that moment a strong hand seized her, holding her up while she got her breath back. A man's voice, reassuringly calm, said, "Don't struggle—I'll soon get you in."

"Terry!" she gasped.

"I'm all right," the man said. "I'll come back for him in a minute. . . . Just relax."

She felt his hands close on the sides of her, she felt herself being dragged backwards through the water as he kicked out. She lay still, with her legs together and her hands by her side, trying to make it easier for him, trying not to think. It seemed a terribly long way back. The man was gasping when he finally drew her into the shallows. She lay still, and he hurried off to the sea. The raft was still there but it was visibly sagging. "It'll sink," she cried in an agonized voice. "It's sinking . . . Tony . . . !"

"I'll get him," the man said again. "Don't worry." In a moment he was back in the sea, striking out with a powerful fast crawl. Sally knelt in the surf, staring after him, her face rigid with fear. Kira had joined her. They didn't speak, but kept their eyes fixed on the man as he swam. Suddenly Sally gasped in her breath sharply and clutched Kira's arm as the air bed heeled over. Tony had disappeared! Then she saw that the man was there. He'd reached Tony. She could see them both now. They were coming back—but slowly, oh so slowly. The man must be exhausted. . . . Now there were other people gathered from nowhere, and the surf was coming in, the men ploughing in to help just as it seemed that the belching figure would never make the shore. In a few seconds Tony was brought in, scared but unharmed, and Sally was scolding him with the vehemence of enormous relief and turning to the rescuer, the brown-cheeked man from "their place," who was almost spent but who managed a fleet, wry grin all the same as he fought to get his breath back.

## CHAPTER II

HERE was a period of confusion after that as people pressed around, congratulating the rescuers and offering help. Fifteen minutes later a casual passer-by would scarcely have known that anything unusual had occurred. The hen-pecked had struggled back into his wet flannels and was drinking a cup of sweet tea from the vacuum flask.

"I simply don't know how I can ever begin to thank you," Sally said to the rescuer. She had said something like it several times before, but words seemed so inadequate and her relief and gratitude

were so boundless that she had to go on saying it.

"Really, it was nothing," the man said. "I'm glad I happened to be around, that's all."

"You must be absolutely worn out."

He grinned, showing strong white teeth. "I take a lot of wearing out," he said. It was true that he looked as though he had seen his terrific exertions. He was Sally's new realization, a immensely large man—well over six feet, and massively built. His thick black hair was clipped short, his rather heavy jaw was dark-shadowed, and he had very vivid blue eyes. The total physical effect was one of tremendous virility. He looked about 40.

"I honestly thought those last few yards were going to be too much for you."

"Well, I'm not going to tell you myself, to tell you the truth. There was a bit of a current . . . His manner was easy, his accent polished. "Still, all's well that ends well."

"He put his cup down on the grass and got to his feet. "Thank you for the tea, it was just what I needed. . . . Now I guess I'll be pushing along," he said.

"Tell me your name," Sally said.

"It's Roscoe, Frank Roscoe."

"And I'm Sally Mellany. . . . The awful boy over there is Tony, as you know—the little girl is my daughter Alison—and that's Kira, from Norway."

Roscoe smiled again, his glance resting appreciatively on her for a moment. "Always wanted to go to Norway," he said gallantly.

"Are you on holiday here?" Sally asked.

"No, I'm on business, of a sort—hoping to find a small farm I can buy, as a master of fact . . . I should have started looking this morning, but the weather was so good I decided to take time off and have a day on the beach."

"Those good things you did . . . ! Sally was watching with some concern as Roscoe struggled to tuck his shirt into his sodden trousers. "You're going to be terribly uncomfortable in those wet things . . . Have you got to go?"

"Not really—just a few miles."

"You've got a car, have you?"

"No—I came by bus and walked along the beach."

"Then we must take you home. You can't possibly go on a bus like that."

"Oh, I shall soon dry—I don't want to break up your picnic."

"Heavens, we're not in the mood for picnics now—at least, I'm not . . . Where are you staying?"

"I don't suppose you'd know it—it's a little place called Freshney Stoke, near Bath. I'm at a pub there."

"But we live in Bath," Sally told him, "we know it very well . . . We'll drop you off on the way—if it could be easier . . ."

"Well, it's extremely kind of you . . ."

"It's the very least we can do . . . Come on, children, get ready."

In a few minutes everyone was dressed and all the belongings were gathered up. Roscoe rejoined the party and they all set off over the bank. Alison's toe, forgotten during tea, had begun to hurt again now, she declared, and Roscoe carried her, lifting her on to his shoulder. Sally and Kira were a feature. Tony followed behind him, glancing up at him every few seconds in unconcealed admiration. When they reached the car Kira took the children in the back and Roscoe got in beside Sally.

"What sort of farm are you looking for, Mr. Roscoe?" she asked, as they left the sandy track and turned into the high road.

"Observing quite small—a few acres for a poultry farm, actually—I'm one of those redundant army chaps—too old at 40! Now I've got to find some way of turning my gratuity into a living."

It took them little more than half an hour to reach Freshney Stoke by the side roads that only knew the Air Ministry. At the tiny, desolate stone village, she said, "Which is your pub, Mr. Roscoe?"

"The Plough—on the left, the shore, . . . Very modest, but I'm having to watch the old shacks at the moment . . . Fine—that'll do nicely . . ."

Sally brought the car to a stop, and turned to him. "I know my husband will be most anxious to meet you. She said, "but I don't think this—will you come and have dinner with us tomorrow evening? I'm certain my husband would never forgive me if he didn't have the chance to say 'Thank you himself.... Won't you give us the pleasure of your company?"

"Well, if you put it like that, I'll be very happy to come, of course.... Where exactly do you live?" "Don't worry about that," she said. "I'll come and find you." "How would it be if I picked you up at 6.30— that will give us plenty of time for drinks before dinner?"

"I would be fine," Roscoe said. "I'll look forward to it...." He got out of the car, still dripping a little, and pushed the door shut. Then he turned to her. "I'll be back at 7.30," he said. "You won't tell anyone about this, will you? About our little adventure, I mean? I wouldn't want any of those newspapers trying to make a story out of it."

"But it is a story," Sally said. "Everyone ought to know about it."

"No, no.... If any newspapers do get in touch with you, Mrs. Mellany, please don't tell them anything. I'd hate any publicity—army training, you know. Anyway, I'd feel such a fool.... I mean it!"

"Well—all right," Sally said reluctantly. "Though I think you're much too modest."

\* \* \*

As he changed his clothes and spruced himself up in his small, plainly furnished bedroom, Roscoe was aware of a pleasurable excitement he experienced when he was about to have a new adventure. It was too soon yet, of course, to know just how rewarding the trip would be, or indeed whether it would be worth undertaking at all—but the preliminary indications seemed hopeful. What he needed now was more information.

As soon as opening time arrived he made his way to the pub, and the door was open, and he glanced inside before entering. The landlord of the Plough, shirt-sleeved, was elderly, was leaning against the counter reading a newspaper. There were no other customers yet. Roscoe went in.

"Evening," he said cheerfully.

"Evening," the landlord said. "Well, I must say it's a lovely bit of country you've got around here."

"Very nice, isn't it?"

"Have you lived in these parts long?"

"I've been in this house 30 years."

"Really?—then you must know the district pretty well. I wonder if you know some people named Mellany?"

"Mellany?—Do you mean Mr. John Mellany?"

"Could be. I met a Mrs. Mellany today—dark, very attractive, with a couple of nice kids."

"That's right, sir, that would be the Mellany's. Everyone round here knows them—well, of them, anyway. They're pretty big shots in Bath."

"Are they?"

"Oh, yes—they're always being written about in the papers. Public work, you know—not her so much, but he's always busy—president of this and that, helping on committees—you know the sort of thing."

"Useful chap," Roscoe said.

"Oh, they're fine people, the Mellany's, and very well liked. Do a lot of good and don't throw their weight about too much—not like some!"

Roscoe stopped his whiskey thoughtfully. This was really beginning to sound most promising—always supposing he was strong enough for it when it was over. A *conscientious* type. Mellany, obviously. High-minded. Might be just the right material for Plan II.... Roscoe continued to explore the ground.

"What does he do for a living—do you know?"

"John Mellany?—Oh, I don't think he does anything now. He was a schoolteacher in all these years, and perhaps the Romans left him—always writing about them—but that's just a hobby. Used to be a lecturer at Bristol, I seem to remember—but he gave that up.... He's one of the lucky ones—doesn't need to work."

"Well, off is he?"

"Oh, he's well off, all right."

The Mellany's home was a long, two-storyed Georgian house standing in a beautiful walled garden on the western outskirts of Bath. John Mellany had preferred it to the exiguous Regency

## THE GOLDEN DEED

terraces in the centre of the town because it was so much quieter to work in. One end was given up to his wife, who did a little embroidery and needlework. There were no traffic noises to interrupt him, and he could bury himself in his writing without fear of interruption. The fortune he had inherited had neither spoiled nor embarrassed him. He was much too active a man, as well as too self-disciplined, even to fall into idleness; and in addition to many good causes he supported, he had aided research by financing a number of the country's best universities.

He was still absorbed in his notes when the family came back. He hadn't expected them home till after 6 and he looked up in surprise as the car turned into the drive. The two children, he noticed were both in the back with Kira, which was unusual. After a moment he put his papers down and went to the car. He walked with a slight limp, the result of an accident to his left leg 10 years before.

One glance at Sally's face was enough to tell him that something was badly wrong. He said, in an anxious tone, "What's happened, darling?"

"I'll tell you later," she said. Her voice was well-controlled, but Mellany could sense the underlying strain. "There's nothing to worry about now."

"Mummy and Tony were nearly drowned!"

Aldison said importantly.

Mellany shot Sally a look of horror, an incredulous, questioning look, and she gave a little nod. "Kira would have been angry if I'd taken the children off to the buck ladder for a while."

"Of course," Kira said. "Come, children." She gathered them up and went off with them down the garden.

**Andrew Grove, English detective writer, was born in Leicester in 1908. A graduate in economics, he has been reporter, leader writer and foreign correspondent on London newspapers and author of books on Russia. He is noted for his characterization and suspense that combine to create mysterious suspense. Three are now published in ten languages. Many have been televised. He reports his chief interest outside work is selling small boats.**

Sally said, "Let's go upstairs, John, we can talk better there."

Mellany followed her. In their room, with the door shut, she looked at him for a tremulous moment, then flung herself weeping into his arms. "Oh, John, it's been so awful.... Darling hold me tight."

He held her, soothing and comforting her through the wild storm of tears, waiting until her shaking sobs had quietened. Then, at last, in her embrace, jerky sentences, she told him what had happened.

He said, "Sally!—oh, my darling!" and held her closer. Her face was drawn and white. He was an imaginative man. Listening to her, he knew her terror as though he had suffered it himself.

"It all happened so quickly, John.... One evening everything was all right, and then, before I even had time to think, I was standing in the kitchen and Tony was out of the room, and I was absolutely certain we were both going to be drowned."

"Darling, I've asked him to come and have dinner with us tomorrow, is that all right? I thought you'd want to meet him."

"Of course," Mellany said. "What did you say his name was?"

"Roscoe," Frank Roscoe.

"What's he like?"

"Well—he's big and dark, and rather good-looking in a military sort of way, and about your age, I should think.... He seems very nice and he's certainly very impressive. He really did risk his life, and he didn't hesitate at all."

"I think everything's all right," John said simply. "It's rather a frightening thought."

"Well, darling," Sally said, "we must try to do something about it. I know we can't possibly hope to repay him, but there may be some practical things we can do.... From what he said, I should think he's going to have a bit of a struggle over this farm, and he seems to be very much on his own, so perhaps we'll be able to help him in some way—if he's not too proud."

"I certainly hope so," Mellany said.

\* \* \*

Roscoe was waiting on the seat outside the Plough when Sally called for him at 5.30 the following evening.

"Well, I wouldn't say you were showing any signs of shock," he said, as he got into the car beside her.

"Thank you.... It's amazing what a good sleep will do."

"How's Tony today?"

"Still lamenting his lost air bed—but otherwise it might never have happened."

"And the foot?"

"The foot? Oh—Alison. She's all right, too.... What a memory you have!"

"It's a matter of training," Roscoe said, with a grin.

"How is your search going? Have you started yet?"

"Well, I've not actually looked at anything, but I've put out a few feelers—got in touch with one or two agents, you know.... Quite a hectic morning, as a matter of fact. Bath seems pretty crowded."

"Sally's not used to watching the roads," he said. "What's it like in the winter?"—dead, I suppose?"

"No—just quiet. We think it's very pleasant—but then we like a rather tranquil life."

"Don't you ever get bored?"

"Bored—goes heavens, no. There are always the children, and my husband works at home a good deal."

"What's his line?" Roscoe inquired innocently.

"Well, he's mostly an antiquarian, but he has a lot of other interests, too—various societies and committees.... People are always asking him to do things...."

"Good works, eh? Useful citizen? Highly respected in the community? In the touch of mockery in Roscoe's tone, Sally flushed. Sally."

"Well, yes, I suppose he is," she said.

"It doesn't sound too exciting."

"It's not exciting—but it's often very interesting." She smiled across at him. "If it comes to that, I don't suppose you'll find poultry farming exactly a riot!"

Roscoe gritted back at her. "You've got a point there," he said.

As the car turned in through the wrought iron gates, Mellany came out into the drive to greet his guest; his limp a little more marked than usual because of his nervousness. He was always rather shy at first encounters, and this particular encounter was a real ordeal. His massive obligation to Roscoe weighed on him. He grasped the big hand the visitor extended him, and his shade longer than he would normally have done.

"I'm so glad you were able to come," he said, and paused. "My wife has told me all about what happened yesterday—your very brave action.... It's difficult to find words to express my gratitude for what you did. I can only say, thank you from the bottom of my heart.... I owe you more than I can ever repay."

"I was nothing to it," Roscoe said breathlessly. He gave a boyish smile. "I'd really be happier if you'd forget all about it."

"I'm not likely to do that," Mellany said, "but I understand.... Let's go and have a drink, shall we?" With a friendly pressure on Roscoe's arm he conducted him to chairs set out round a little table under the copper beech. "We thought it might be pleasanter to sit here, as it's so warm.... What would you like? Gin and something? Sherry?"

Mellany finished mixing the drinks and handed them round.

"Well, this is quite an occasion," he said, raising his glass. "Your very good health, Roscoe!"

"Happy days!" Roscoe said.

They drank. Sally took one of the chairs and the men followed her example. Mellany passed the cigarette to Roscoe, and lit his pipe. He was beginning to look more at ease.

"Well," he said, "my wife tells me you've just come back from abroad."

"Yes.... I was a Major in the Gloucesters when they bawler-mented me."

"That's the general idea. I may be crazy—but I've always been used to an open-air life and I know I'd never be able to stand a desk job. Ordinary farming's more than I could tackle, but I think I could manage poultry—and some people seem to make a living at it."

"I expect you've been pretty thoroughly into the economics of it," Mellany said.

"Oh yes, I think I know the form. I've been

browsing in the books quite a lot — you can pick up a good bit there . . . " Roscoe grinned. "At least I can tell the difference between a White Leghorn and a Rhode Island Red."

"It's more than I can!" Mellanby said. He puffed thoughtfully at his pipe for a moment. "You know, I should think it might help if you could talk to someone who's actually running a poultry farm. I can't think of anyone offhand, but I'm sure we could find someone . . ."

"That would be a great help," Roscoe agreed. "We'll have to get you in touch, of course," Sally said, "is a wife. Are you married?"

"No — somehow I never seemed to get around to it. But I probably will take a wife when I'm a bit more settled — must have someone to collect the eggs! First I've got to find a place, though."

Mellanby, looking thoughtful, got up to refill the glasses. "It's certainly going to be quite an undertaking," he said, "starting from scratch the way you're doing."

Roscoe nodded. "It'll be all right if the money holds out."

Mellanby said, "Yes," and frowned. He was a fastidious man, and there was something very distasteful about offering financial help as a direct return for a favor. Roscoe could understand and feel the same way about it. Yet the subject had been raised — and now was surely the time to show willingness. As casually as he could, he said, "Well, if an interest-free loan would help you over the hump in the early stages, you've only to tell me."

"That's most generous of you," Roscoe said gratefully. "It certainly helps it in mind. I'll have to stand on my two cents for a few possible."

"Thinking of standing on your own feet?" Mellanby said, with a faint smile, "how are you planning to get about while you're looking for a place? Sally tells me you haven't a car."

"No, I haven't . . . I managed to get myself through the driving test the other day, so I've got a license, but the car will have to wait till I can see what's more clearly . . ." He grimed "I guess I'll have to rely on public transport."

Mellanby shook his head. "I'd have thought a car would be absolutely essential while you're searching. You're bound to be covering a lot of ground, and you'll find public transport very thin, as soon as you get off the main roads . . . Look, why not borrow my car?"

"Ah, that is very good of you, Mellanby, but you'll need it yourself."

"We've got two cars, as you can see. I can easily share Sally's."

"I'm — well, it's darded nice of you, I must say, and very tempting . . . It would make a lot of difference — save me hours of footslogging . . . And I'll be most grateful."

"You'll be more than welcome," Mellanby said. "Take mine with you tonight."

"Well," Roscoe said, with obvious relief, "If I can really do it that'll ease another problem for me . . . It looks as though the first thing I'll have to do in the morning is find new lodgings."

"Oh?"

"Yes, the Plough's booked up solid after tonight, so I've got to . . . I tried a couple of other places in the village, but they're full, so now they tell me Bill's bought a block . . . Still, I expect I'll find something . . ."

Mellanby and Sally exchanged glances. There was a little pause. Then Sally said, "Won't you come and stay with us, Mr. Roscoe? We'd be so pleased if you would, and we've lots of room."

Roscoe looked quite taken aback. "Oh, no — I couldn't do that — it would be an imposition. You people are much too kind . . . After all, I'm just a stranger . . ."

"We don't feel you're a stranger," Sally said, "and we'd be delighted to have you . . . In fact, we insist, darling, don't we?"

"We do indeed," Mellanby said. "One of us will collect you at the Plough tomorrow morning, Roscoe, and you can use this house as a base until you've fixed up . . ."

"I'm overwhelmed," Roscoe said. "But I can't pretend it wouldn't make things a darned sight easier for me — and apart from that, I'd enjoy it a lot."

Then it's settled," Sally said. She stood up at the caught sight of Mrs. Barney, the cook, at the open front door. "After dinner I'll show you to your room."

\* \* \*

Roscoe moved in on the following morning.

with one large suitcase, a stock of poultry journals, and a few oddments. The rest of his belongings, he explained, were being shipped in London until he had somewhere to put them.

Sally rang up some of her country friends to see if they knew of a successful poultry farmer in the district. She was soon put on to a young man named Tom Adams, who turned out to be very affable and told her on the phone that he'd be glad to talk to Roscoe and give him any advice he could. Roscoe, well pleased, went straight off to see him, and they had a long day.

Sally was sitting with the children under the copper beech when he drove in in the evening, scattering the gravel as he jammed on the brakes hard. This time he was bearing gifts — a huge bunch of red and white carnations. He crossed the lawn to her and presented them with a bow and a flower box.

"For you," he said, "starting from scratch the way you're doing."

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Roscoe gave a loud guffaw. "Well, that's not much use, is it? You'll have to practise . . . Come on, we'll teach you." He led the way across the lawn to the boot and hauled out a punchball on an adjustable stand. "Get to keep fit!" he called to Sally, with a grin. "Sally! Shall we take it round the back, Tony?"

Tony tried to lift the stand, but the base was of solid iron and he couldn't move it. Roscoe laughed, and threw it lightly over his shoulder. "Come on, we'll teach you."

Alison shed a tear or two after they'd gone. "He didn't bring me a present," she sobbed.

"Never mind, pet," Sally said. "Come and help me arrange these flowers, and then we'll turn out all the cupboards and see what we can find for the June sale."

Alison brightened at once. "Oh, yes," she said. "They keep me amused for a long time, won't it?"

A long, low lesson was in full swing on the back lawn when Mellanby emerged from his study at 6:30. Roscoe, his magnificent torso bared to the waist, was showing Tony how to punch, while Kira stood by and watched. His tremendous blows cracked against the punchball like gunshots in the still garden. With a great rippling of muscles and a single, brief, sharp intake of breath, he stopped.

"Are you heavyweight?" Tony asked, as Roscoe finally allowed the punchball to come to rest.

Roscoe nodded, with a wink at Mellanby.

"Are you a champ, too?"

"Well, I used to box for the regiment," Roscoe said, "and I generally managed to win . . . Now you have a go."

Alison began to batter the punchball. Roscoe stood back, watching him. "Good thing for young chaps to be able to use their fists," he said to Mellanby.

Mellanby smiled and said nothing. "Too many young sissies about, if you ask me."

"Would you say so . . . ? What's your definition of a sissie?"

"Any chap who can't defend himself properly . . . pity you can't have a crack with us, Mellanby — but I guess that leg of yours would let you down . . ."

Following his demonstration of prowess in the garden, something extraordinary seemed to have happened to Roscoe. He now appeared determined to dominate the table too, both with his physical presence and his loud voice. He was off speech, with the result that BBC seemed to sing and translantic idioms, suddenly began to jar. The uninhibited cross-glances he kept throwing at Kira made Sally feel decidedly uneasy. Mellanby,

normally so tolerant, relapsed after a while into near-silence as Roscoe continued to hold the stage. It was Sally, when at last she was alone with Mellanby, who put their joint concern into words.

"John," she said, "do you think you're going to like Roscoe?"

Roscoe gave a wry smile. "I'm having a good try."

"It was awful tonight, wasn't it . . . ? I simply can't imagine what got into him."

"Well, yes, but I don't think it could have been only that. He's completely different today — almost like a different person . . . I don't understand him at all."

"Neither do I," Mellanby said, "but then we don't really know him very well yet. We'll have to wait and see."

"He's a shocking exhibitionist — that display of muscle on the lawn . . . I was watching from the window. I think he was doing it to impress Kira . . ."

"Well, if you're one of those very brassy chaps I suppose it's natural to show off sometimes . . . And we'll forget we were glad enough of his braves a couple of days ago."

"I know," Sally looked distressed. "It's dreadful that we should be talking like this about him — it seems so horribly ungrateful after what he did . . . I know I ought to like him — but actually I think I'm a bit afraid of him."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"It's true . . . If he can be so arrogant now what's he going to be like in a week or two? He's beginning to take possession of the house . . ."

"Really, Sally, I think you're imagining things."

Mellanby was away all next day. An Antiquaries' summer school was being held at Weston-Super-Mare, and he'd been asked to preside at the opening session. Sally usually went with him on these occasions, but this time she'd decided not to.

It was nearly 10 when he got home. The house was quiet, the children were asleep. Sally was sitting alone in the garden room, with the french doors open to the warm night.

"Hello, darling," she said. "I'm so glad you're back . . . How did it go?"

"Quite well. There were more people than last year and a lot of them young."

"You must be tired. Come and sit down."

Mellanby joined her on the settee and began to fill his pipe. "How's our friend been?"

"He was quite all right at dinner . . . At the moment he's writing in the garden with Kira."

Mellanby said, "Oh?"

"I hope he's not going to turn out to be a wolf."

"Well — Kira's not likely to come to much harm in the garden, I shouldn't think."

"It's not just that — it's everything . . . Haven't you noticed how he looks at us?"

"That's what I mean."

"Well, you're both quite an eyeful!"

Sally smiled. "John, do be serious for a moment — I'm really very worried. Kira's only 18 and she's rather impressionable and everyone knows that a foreigner often seems very attractive . . . It would be awful if she fell for him — I think we'd just have to bunt her off home. It's a bit of a responsibility . . . It isn't as though he's a young man . . . Don't you think perhaps we ought to do something about it?"

"Do you mean you'd like me to speak to him?"

"Well, I think that would be the best way . . . I could talk to Kira, but I don't want to upset her . . ."

When Roscoe went out to the car in the morning, Mellanby strolled with him. It was a distasteful task he had to perform and he was anxious to get it over.

"Have you a big program today?" he asked.

"Four places," Roscoe said. "One of them sounds quite promising."

"Good . . . I'm sure you'll understand . . . Don't let me tell you what he can get you."

Mellanby stood at his for a moment, speechless. Then he said, "Well, don't try to take it here, that's all."

Roscoe looked sullen. "I don't see . . . he

began. Then a grin spread slowly over his face. "Okay, old man—I certainly don't want to abuse your hospitality. She's not the only well-shaped pebble on the beach. No more walks in the garden—I promise."

"Thank you," Mellanby said coldly.

\* \* \*

There was more trouble over Roscoe that afternoon—this time of a sort that Sally had been half-expecting all along. Around 5 o'clock, just as she was settling down to an installment of *Winnie the Pooh* with Alison, he rang up to say he'd got in a bit of a jam with the car.

"Nothing serious," he said, "no casualties, and no damage to speak of—but I'm stuck and I'll need some help to get clear."

"What's happened?" Sally asked.

"God my near-side wing jammed against a stone wall—I was trying to pass a caravan in a lane, and there wasn't room. We're both stuck ... What's the best place to ring for a tow-truck?"

"Where are you?"

"Well, I'm telephoning from the main road where the tarmac ends. The signpost says 'Eversleigh ½ mile away—and just a minute—'Crouch 4' the other. The lane goes to Pointings ..."

"Oh, I know the place," Sally said. "It's Blackett's Lane ..."

"There's a bridge being rebuilt a little way along—looks like through the middle of the endin' it."

"That's right. How far along is the car?"

"Just beyond the bridge."

"Well, I'd better ring our own garage and get them to send someone. They're very reliable."

"Thanks a lot, Sally. Sorry to be such a nuisance."

"That's all right," Sally said, "it could happen to anyone. Don't worry."

Sally rang off and dialed the garage. The owner, a phlegmatic man named Jack Reed, said the truck was out on a job, but as soon as it came in he'd take it straight round to Blackett's Lane himself. He couldn't say exactly when it would be.

Sally called King and asked him to take over the responsibility and then went along to the study to tell Mellanby the news. He didn't seem at all surprised.

"Perhaps I ought to run over there, John," Sally said. "Roscoe will wonder what's happened if no one turns up."

Mellanby pushed his papers aside. "I'll come with you," he said. "We may be able to lend a hand."

There was a real tangle in Blackett's Lane. The caravan, a large and ornate-looking cream trailer, was immovably wedged between one of the stone walls and the road. Mellanby and Sally had to go through a field gate and back over the wall to get round to the front of the obstruction. Roscoe was standing there in the road, smoking a cigarette. A few yards away a man and a woman were leaning against a black car. The glum expression, on all three faces, suggested that there'd been a certain amount of recrimination about the incident.

"Well, we'll be here," Roscoe said in surprise, as he cast a quick glance at the Mellanbys.

"The truck won't be here yet," Sally explained, "so we thought we'd better come."

Roscoe said "Oh!" He looked at Mellanby in some embarrassment. "Sorry to bring you out, old man ... Sorry about it all!"

The caravan owner approached. He was a big, burly, graying man of 55 or so, with a florid, freckled face and a bit of a paunch. He was wearing a plain shirt with the collar rolled up, and khaki shorts that were bent over his stomach. "It's your car, is it?" he said to Mellanby.

Mellanby nodded. "Well, if you don't mind me saying so, this young fellow's not fit to drive it. He was going a heck of a lot too fast."

"I'd have been all right if it hadn't been for the bridge," Roscoe said. "All that clutter they've left around! ... What do they want to widen a bridge in a lane like this for, anyway?"

"They're going to widen the whole lane," Mellanby said, "and bring the main road through it to bypass Eversleigh village. It's an accident black spot."

"So will this be if people try to bring caravans through it," Roscoe said.

"We wouldn't have thought of it," the caravan owner's wife said, "but someone told us there was

## THE GOLDEN DEED

an old quarry along here that would make a good stopping place. We didn't realize the lane would be quite so narrow . . . ." She was at least 20 years younger than Mellanby, and very attractive—a striking beauty, with dark eyes and a beautifully curved mouth and one of the loveliest complexions Sally had ever seen.

"I know the quarry," Sally said, with a friendly smile. "It would make a nice stopping place."

"Anyhow," Mellanby said, "there doesn't seem to be much harm done . . ." He walked over to the wall and took a look at the Number wing. "I wonder if there's something you couldn't lift it off?"

"We tried it already," Roscoe said—adding, with a slight grin, "I doubt if you'd make that much difference, old man."

"Oh, well, the crane should be able to lift it from the other side of the wall—and when it's free we can back out."

"That's about it," Roscoe agreed. "Let's hope no one's been here to see us. What do you think you do think it'll be before the truck comes?"

"I should think it might be an hour," Sally said.

For a moment or two they continued to stand and gaze at the road block. Then the caravan owner said, "Well, we're not going to shift it until just looking at it. What about you folks joining my wife and me in a glass of sherry while we're waiting?"

"That's a cheerful suggestion," Sally said.

"I reckon it's better than sitting here and getting a blouse," came in and set the homestead—that is, that we can get in." Our name's Sherston, by the way. George and Eva Sherston." He had a bluff, direct manner that Sally found engaging.

Sally said, "Ours is Mellanby. This is Frank Roscoe—he's staying with us."

Sherston added, "Glad to know you all . . . ."

His wife and wife of speech had a trans-Atlantic flavor, but Mellanby didn't think he was American. "Shall I go ahead?"

"But what a marvelous caravan," Sally exclaimed, gazing around at the exquisitely appointed interior.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Eve Sherston said.

"It's so roomy—why, it's more like a flat."

"Yes, we've got a sitting-room, bedroom, kitchen and bath. It's much easier to keep clean than a flat, too."

"I love the big windows," Sally said.

Eve nodded. "It's almost like living out of doors, but without the discomfort. . . . Do come and have a look round."

Sally followed her into the kitchen. It was a housewife's kitchen in miniature, with every variety of space-saving contraption and gadget.

"I never realized caravans could be as exciting as this," Sally said. "How the children would love it!"

"How many children have you?" Eve asked.

"Two—boy and a girl. Eight and six."

"Aren't you lucky?" Eve looked very wistful.

"I adore children, but that's as far as I seem to get. . . . Still, I haven't given up hope."

Sally was drawing the cork from a bottle of sherry as she returned to the sitting-room. "So you like our little home, Mrs. Mellanby?" she said.

"It's wonderful. . . . It must be enormous fun."

"We think so—which is just as well, as well as we've got for the time being. We debated whether to stay in hotels or buy a van, and decided the van would be more free-and-easy. . . . He poured five glasses of sherry and handed them round.

"Well, this is very hospitable of you," Mellanby said. He savored the sherry, which was excellent.

"You're on holiday, are you?"

"That's right," Sherston said. "And a good long holiday it's going to be, isn't it, Eve?" His glance rested on his wife for a moment with possessive affection. "First England, then all round Europe with a bit of luck. If it takes us years, so much the better."

"Where are you from?" Roscoe asked.

"We're from Trinidad—British West Indies. I'm an oil man—at least, I was. Mining engineer."

"Are you planning to go back there eventually?" Sally asked.

"Well, we haven't really got around to deciding that," Mrs. Mellanby. "The fact is, we had a big stroke of luck and we're going to enjoy ourselves aren't we? Eve? I've very fond memories. I bought myself a small Crown concession in the bush with the idea there might be oil there—and it turned out there was. So now we're sitting pretty."

Mellanby said, "How long are you thinking of staying around here?"

"Well, it depends what there is to see—our time's our own. We've got a lot of ground to cover but I've heard Bath's a pretty interesting place."

"It's unique," Mellanby said.

"Yes, that's what they tell us. . . . What would you advise us to go for?"

"Well, you'll want to see the Roman bath, of course—there's nothing quite so marvelous in North America as to my mind. It's very old, as it was 2,000 years ago. You can see the stone stones where the Romans used to stand at the edge of the water, and the places they used for drying and dressing. You can see their lead pipes, and the hollow tiles they used, and a dismounting block for the chariots—it's all there, a complete bit of history."

Sherston was listening as eagerly as a schoolboy. "That's all right," he said. "Even if we're not going to be here for some time. . . . And what about those famous waters they talk about so much—do you think they could get this sum of mine down, eh?" He patted his comfortable waistline.

Eve said, with a smile, "Someone told George that a spa course was just the thing to one up in middle-age. Do you think it works?"

"Not at all," Mellanby said. "But I've never tried it myself."

"Does he need tuning up?" Roscoe asked. He was looking at Eve Sherston—looking in such a blatantly intimate way that his meaning couldn't be mistaken. Combined with the remark, the glance was almost an indecent assault.

There was a sudden silence. Eve looked very uncomfortable. Mellanby felt too ashamed and embarrassed to speak. Really, the man was quite intolerable where women were concerned—an unrestrained off . . . .

At that moment, fortunately, there was a knock from the lane. Roscoe said, "That'll be the truck," and came to the door. The others followed. Jack Reed, with the two men his brother had, was already sizing up the job. He nodded to Sally and Mellanby, said "Bit of trouble, eh?" and got straight down to work.

The disentangling took quite a time. Even when the car wing was lifted it still had to be got away from the wall. But at last it was freed, and one of the garage men bent over to ease it out, not without a few more scratches and dents.

"You'll have to let me know what the bill is, Mr. Mellanby," Sherston said. "I'll be happy to pay half."

"Oh, it won't amount to much," Mellanby said. "You needn't worry about that."

"Well, it was partly my fault—this lane sure is narrow. How much further we have to go before we reach the quarry?"

"Only a couple of hundred yards or so."

"Oh—then I guess we should make it without difficulty . . . Well, I must say it's been fine meeting you people . . ." Sherston's cordial glance embraced Mellanby and Sally, but ostentatiously excluded Roscoe.

Eve smiled at Sally. "I wonder if you'd care to bring the children along to see the caravan some time?" Mrs. Mellanby? It would be so nice if you would."

"Do you mean it?" Sally said. "I know they'd adore it."

"Of course I mean it. Come and have tea one afternoon. I don't know what George's plans are, except that the best thing would be for me to give you a ring."

Sally nodded. "The number's Bath 41004 . . . It's in the book."

"Lovely," Eve said. "I shall look forward to it."

## CHAPTER III

**S**ALLY and Mellanby had two more days to study Roscoe's peculiar personality before the next major incident occurred. During that time, his behavior was so unpleasant that they could no longer have any doubts about their feeling towards him.

Only Mellanby's profound sense of obligation prevented him from making his leave at an early date. He discussed it with Sally, and after a long, anxious session and they agreed that if things got no better the moment was bound to come—and

probably very soon. But Mellanby was deeply reluctant to take the step before he had to.

Then five days after Roscoe had left the house, there was a disconcerting episode. It happened before dinner, when Sally and Mellanby were in the garden. The telephone rang, and Kira answered it in the sitting room. The call was for Roscoe, who had just returned from a long day in the country. He came quickly downstairs to take it. Mellanby hoped it might have something to do with clinching a property deal, but evidently it hadn't. Roscoe was very angry, and very angry. Harsh crackling sounds were audible through the open window. Roscoe, holding the receiver away from his ear, glanced a little sheepishly across the lawn.

Stuttered one-sided conversation followed, on a rising pitch of temper never before heard in the Mellanby house. "Eve, Sally, I want you to make a fuss about, chap . . . and, and, and, more aggressively, 'you'd better watch your step, too, or you'll get hurt — I'm not used to being threatened . . .' Presently, with another glance across the lawn, Roscoe reached out and closed the window and the Mellanby's heard no more.

\* \* \*

On the following afternoon Sally took Tony and Alison over to Blackett's Lane to have tea at the caravan. Eve stood by the kettle, and when they left the house after their meeting to make the arrangements, and Sally had accepted with alacrity. The children had been told about the caravan and were both eagerly looking forward to the cutting.

They reached the quarry about 3:30. Sally's recollections of the place were a little vague, but it turned out to be quite as pleasant as she remembered.

Eve was sitting in a deck chair by the caravan reading a book when they arrived. At the sound of the car she waved and came smiling to meet them, greeting the children with a friendly "Hello!". There was no sign of George Sherston, and Eve explained that he'd gone into Bath for the afternoon. It would give Sally and herself a better chance to talk, she said, with an oddly conspiratorial air.

Once again, as Sally looked at her, she was struck by Eve's outstandingly attractive appearance. The children took to her at once, and were fascinated when she showed them how all the bits and pieces of the caravan worked.

Afterwards Eve got them to gather sticks, and lit a fire outside the caravan and both the kettle and just as they were about to eat, George came. He'd prepared a superb tea for them inside, and, altogether, was proving herself a model children's hostess.

Both Alison and Tony were looking a little sombrely at the time of the last of the cakes had disappeared. Eve, casting about for something new to occupy them, said, "Do you collect conkers, Tony?"

"You bet!" Sally said, leaning up at once. "I've got a 49'er at home," he confided. "It's a last-yearer. It's the school coneker. We have four conkers, too."

"Well, there are no end of them under that tree there — but I don't know whether they're ripe."

"Oh, I'll soon tell. Come on, Alison, let's go and see. Can we Mum?"

"Of course," Sally said. "You can do what you like as long as you keep away from the cliff." She watched them race off. For the first time, she and Eve were alone together,

"Well," Eve said with a smile, "now that the little pitchers are out of the way I can give you the message I've got for you. George says he's terribly sorry last night — he realizes he was awful, and he'll never forgive his 'error'."

Sally looked at her blankly. "What on earth are you talking about, Eve?"

"Why, his ringing up, of course. Obviously he ought to have spoken to one of you first — it was unforgivable. However angry he was he ought to have done that."

Sally stared. "You mean it was he who rang up Roscoe?"

"'Why, yes. Didn't you know?'"  
"No, Roscoe didn't tell us who it was."

She broke off. "What was it all about?"

"Well, it was quite stupid actually. Believe it or not, Roscoe suddenly turned up here yesterday

morning. I was never so surprised in my life. He said he just happened to be passing, but frankly I didn't believe him. He was carrying around ten thousand pounds. Anyway, it was an odd coincidence that George was away in town. I wouldn't have mentioned it to George at all — he's terribly jealous and I knew he'd be furious about it — but Roscoe was smoking a cigaret and he came into the caravan with it, and as George and I didn't smoke I knew someone had been there. So I had to tell him, and he was mad, as I knew he would be — he took the car to the phone box, and warned Roscoe to keep away."

"Good heavens, Eve, I'm not surprised. And I don't blame him in the least. Eve, I am sorry."

"Well, it wasn't your fault, was it? Anyway, it was a lot of fuss about very little — nothing really happened, except that Roscoe got a bit fresh and I had to tell him to behave himself. I must say he's got the most colossal nerve! I didn't tell George about it, but I think he would have been content just to telephone. What's the matter with the man — hasn't he got a girl of his own?"

"Apparently not," Sally said, "though he obviously ought to have — he's a positive menace. It isn't the first time this sort of thing's happened, you know. John and I got very worried about him and Kira and I few days ago — she's our nice Norwegian girl. John had to speak to him about it. Now it looks as though he's switched to a wife — but I'm afraid he's just a wolf."

Eve smiled. "Well, he'd better not try to take George's wife unless he's looking for trouble! George is a kind old thing at heart, but he'd beat the brains out of anyone he caught making a pass at him. He was both thoughtful and tough, and I'm afraid he's still not very civilized."

"Well, Roscoe who isn't civilized," Sally said bitterly.

Eve gave her a puzzled look. "I agree, I think he's a terrible man — but as he's a guest in your house and a friend of yours . . ." She broke off. "Well, it's a bit difficult."

"He's not a friend," Sally said. "He's much more a friend and much less . . ." In a few words, she told Eve about the rescue incident, and all that had followed it.

Eve listened, fascinated. "Well," she said, "that really is a story. Now things are beginning to make sense. You know, George and I simply couldn't make out how Roscoe fitted into the picture — we were absolutely baffled. You and your husband seemed so charming and gentle, and Roscoe — the way he behaved! You should have heard George on the subject that first night."

"We can't — we can't at all," Sally said. "Sometimes he seems quite normal — and other times he behaves like a particularly nasty delinquent. It's terribly worrying."

"I should think so. What are you going to do about him?"

"Oh, we're going to tell him he'll have to go. We've had to do it before, but the thing is, he did save me and Tony, nothing can alter that — and John's very conscientious."

"Heavens!" Eve said. "How conscientious can you get?"

\* \* \*

Now even Mellanby's patience was at an end. For sheer recklessness he had rarely heard anything to be told. Roscoe had exploded. The other tenters were having disturbing thoughts, but this was really going too far. As soon as Sally told him the news he mentally gave Roscoe one more night.

Next morning a letter arrived for Roscoe — the first he'd received at the Mellanby house. The contents were evidently not to his liking, for he looked very glum during breakfast and went off in the car straight to the station. When he returned in the evening he was still brooding, and as soon as dinner was over he asked Mellanby if they could have a private talk. Mellanby took him along to the study and gave him a chair. "What's worrying you?" he asked.

"Well, old man," Roscoe said, "it seems as though I'll have to take you up on that offer of a loan all right."

Mellanby looked at him in surprise. "You mean you've found a place that suits you?"

"No, I haven't found anything — and unless I can raise some money quickly I'll have to give up the whole idea."

"Why, what's the trouble?"

"Well, the fact is, I owe quite a bit," Roscoe said. "I hoped the chap would wait and take it a little at a time, with the farm started to pay, but instead of that he's chasing me for the whole lot right away. That was the happy news I got in letter that morning."

There was a little silence. Then Mellanby said, "How much do you owe?"

"Oh — a thousand or two . . ." Roscoe gave a rueful grin. "Well, more than that, actually. I suppose if I'd come clean with you . . . Seven thousand pounds."

Mellanby started at him. "That's a lot of money."

"You're telling me, old man . . . Still, it wouldn't be a lot to you, would it? I mean, you're obviously well-heeled."

"It's a lot of money by any standards," Mellanby said.

Roscoe gave a shrug. "I'm told you've given much more than that to charity. I mean, I've talked to in the town speaks very highly of your generosity . . . Well, surely I'm a more deserving cause than any charity?"

Mellanby said nothing.

"Look," Roscoe said, "let me put it this way . . . If you know who could save your wife and child from drowning by paying seven thousand pounds beforehand, you'd have paid it, wouldn't you, like a shot?"

"Naturally."

"Well, as it happens, they were saved first, and now you have the chance of settling afterwards. You owe me for their lives. You've talked a great deal about gratitude. Okay — this is the pay-off."

"I've got to put things bluntly. Unless I can raise this money, I'm sunk. You promised to help me, and I need help. I'm claiming it as a right."

Mellanby took out his pipe, and lit it, and puffed away quietly while he considered the position. Finally he said, "All right, Roscoe — I'll be equally blind. I accept that I have an obligation — a big one. It's been weighing on my quite a bit. I've been on the run, opportunity to discharge it. If you'd come to me as I hoped and could, and that you'd found the farce you'd been looking for and needed a few thousand to put you on your feet there, I'd have been glad to help. I still want to help — but I'd like to be quite sure I'll be doing you some real good."

"Surely I'm the best judge of that?"

"Even so, I'd like to know a bit more . . ."

"All right," Roscoe said suddenly. "If you must know, he's a colonel in the R.E.'s — or was. Chap named Lancaster. He's retired now. Lives in London."

"Would you think it pifing if I asked you how you came to borrow so much money?"

"I would — but I don't mind telling you. It was three or four years ago. I was stationed in Kenya, and so was Lancaster. We were good pals. He had a private fortune, lucky chap! Anyway, I got a position to fix myself up with a bit of property out there, it was quite a bit of trouble. Everyone said it was bound to go up in value, so I'd smashed the Mau Mau. Lancaster lent me most of the dough, and I bought it. Then the Mau Mau burned the place down! So I'd got a debt, and nothing to show for it. And that's all there is to it."

"And now he's asking for the whole capital back?"

"That's right. Wants it urgently."

"Would you have any objection to showing me the letter he wrote you?"

"Well, really . . . Are you calling me a liar?"

"Not at all," Mellanby said mildly. "It's just that I'd like to see what he says."

"Well, I'm sorry — you can't. I was so annoyed about the whole thing I tore it up and threw it over the hedge."

"That's a pity. How did he know you were staying here, by the way?"

"I wrote him the other day, out of pure good nature — told him I'd got promising plans and hoped to start paying off the loan pretty soon. I thought it would keep him sweet — but it merely set him off."

Mellanby nodded. "Of course, you could start paying him now with a part of your gratuity — it would show that you meant business . . . After 20 years' service, it most surely be quite a big lump sum?"

Roscoe gave him a long, derisive stare. Then he

said, "I'll need all that for the poultry farm."

"You still plan to buy one?"  
Of course — once I'm in the clear again. With £7,000 from you, I'll have nothing to worry about."

Mellany nodded again. He suddenly felt very tired. "Tell me, what is Col. Lancaster's exact address?"

"That's my affair, Mellany — there's no reason for you to go chasing him up. I've given you all the facts, and they're true — you can take my word for that . . . if you don't want to pay your debts, say so."

Mellany turned out his pipe and got up.

"Well," Roscoe pressed him.

"I'll need to think about it," Mellany said. "We'll talk about it again — tomorrow night."

\* \* \*

First thing next morning Mellany drove into town to check up on Roscoe's story. It went against the grain, but after what had happened he felt he had no choice. With the best will in the world, he'd been unable to believe a word of what he'd been told.

The task proved to be even easier than he'd expected. In the local reference library in Bath, copies of the Army List dating back some time were soon dug up for him. It took him only a few minutes to discover that there had been no Col. Lancaster of the Royal Engineers in recent years. Roscoe had invented him! But that was only the beginning. Until now, Mellany had taken Roscoe's account of himself completely on trust. This seemed to him now to be it. Quickly, he went through the Lists, searching for a Major Frank Roscoe of the Gloucesters. There wasn't one. Roscoe had invented him, too.

For a little while Mellany sat motionless, thinking back to the first developments in the Roscoe saga. It was difficult now to believe that anything had been done above board . . . Presently he left the library and drove out to the Plough at Newey Stoke. There, over a pint of beer, he learned from the landlord that the season had not been a good one in spite of the recent improvement in the weather, and that at no time during the summer had the Plough been without an empty room.

So there it was! — worse, much worse, than Mellany had suspected. There could be no doubt about it now. The web of lies, the money-lending, the request for money — everything fitted. Roscoe was a swindler and a fraud. A confidence man. No wonder he hadn't wasted newspaper publicity after the rescue!

Depressed and puzzled, he drove home and told Sally the result of his inquiries. She listened in shocked silence. Like Mellany, she had been prepared for part of it, but not for the rest.

"What's the difference?" Mellany said. "is how he ever thought he could get away with it. That story of his never even began to sound true."

"Well, he's just not a very good confidence man, darling."

"He's hopeless — I could do better myself! Why did he have to say he was a major in the Gloucesters? And this mythical Lancaster — what put him in the R.E.?" Everyone knows about the army list . . . He was heading for trouble right from the start."

Sally looked thoughtful. "When he first told me he was in the army he'd only just met me, of course. He didn't know then that you had money . . . Perhaps he said the first thing that came into his head — and then had to stick to it and embroider it when he realized he'd been caught."

There was a little pause. Then Sally said, "Any-way — what are you going to do?"

Mellany shrugged. "Have it out with him, I suppose. Hear what he has to say, and then tell him to clear off . . . What else can I decently do . . . Damn the fellow! It was bad enough having to be grateful to him before — now it's quite intolerable."

## CHAPTER IV

THE showman, Mellany realized, would inevitably be most unpleasant. At his suggestion, Sally took steps to see that, apart from the children, they would have the place to themselves for the evening.

It was late that evening when Roscoe came in that evening — and he was by no means in his usual state. Normally he was most particular about his appear-

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ance, but today his clothes looked rumpled and dirty and there was a scratch all down his left cheek — the result — said with a sardonic jouniness, of an argument with a woman he was having in a round field. The scratch was bleeding a little, and he went upstairs to attend to it. When he came down he joined Mellany and Sally in the sitting room and, as always, helped himself to a large drink.

"Well, Mellany, let's get this over before dinner, shall we? What have you decided?" His tone was confident as ever. His eyes were hard and bold. "I checked you up on your story," Mellany said. Roscoe eyed him sharply. "What did, eh . . . ?" He sounded a bit disappointed, but not in the least abashed. "Pity . . . I still, I can't say I'm surprised . . . I don't think you could be quite the sag you seemed to be."

"Really?" Sally exclaimed. "You don't have to insult as well as everything else . . ."

Mellany gave a little sigh. "Well, I suppose to this that doesn't fit . . . Let me know where we are. I think you understand what you've put on a pretty inept performance and I can't imagine what you're thinking you're getting out of it all . . ."

"I'm getting £7,000," Roscoe said. "I'm getting £7,000." Mellany stared at him incredulously. "You surely don't expect that now?"

"Indeed I do! I saved your wife and child, didn't I? I'm in my golden deed, and that's what's going to be your golden-deed."

Mellany shook his head. "You're wrong, Roscoe . . . I won't say our account's squared, because in a sense it never can be, but if you think I'm going to pay £7,000 to a brazen crook you're making a big mistake. What I am going to do is to let you go without preferring any charge, and that'll be your conscience. You'll be a don't-don't you'll sit off at home and try to fleece someone else . . . Still, there it is — you're free to go, and I think it would be much more comfortable all round if you went straight away."

"Oh — you do?" Roscoe said. He struck a match on the sole of his shoe, lit a cigarette, and hung the spent match into the Adamantine fireplace. "Now let me tell you what I think . . . I like it here. The house is all the food's adequate and it all suits me very well. With your £7,000 in the bank I shall get along fine. So I'm staying, Mellany." He grinned at Sally. "I even like your wife — I think I could go places with her."

Mellany sprang up, his face white and hard. "You must be out of your mind . . . Get out of here!"

Roscoe settled his great bulk more comfortably in his chair. He looked as though nothing short of a crane would move him. "You don't know me very yet, Mellany, do you?" — but you're going to very soon. You've been underrating me, you know. Where do you think I was this afternoon? I'll tell you — it'll help you to understand me. I called on Eve Sherston again while her big slab of a husband was in town. I had quite a time with her. See what I mean?"

Sally said, in a voice of horror, "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!" Roscoe mimicked. "You see, I'm not afraid of people. I'm not afraid of Sherston. People are afraid of me. Everybody is, when they get to know you. You are . . . I think you're a bit . . . I think you see you're not . . . You know I could turn you over my knee if I wanted to . . . and nobody wants to get hurt. Not badly hurt! People will do almost anything to avoid it. That's what I've found, anyway. It's the secret of my success."

Mellany took a step towards the telephone. Before he could reach it, Roscoe was in his path, towering over him. A large hand came out, there was a sharp snap like the kick of an elephant, and Mellany fell back with a crash into the chair he had just left.

"Not much use you trying any rough stuff, little man," Roscoe said calmly. "And don't you move, Sally — I'm not having any snouting attack. We're going to come to a full understanding before anybody moves."

Slowly, cautiously, Mellany got to his feet again. "You'll never get away with this, Roscoe," he said. "Surely you can see that . . . ?"

Roscoe stepped forward and gave him a stinging slap on the cheek. Sally sprang up with a cry and tried to reach the phone but Roscoe grabbed her and pushed her chair into the wall.

"Well," Roscoe said, "now that you've had your little lesson, perhaps you'll agree to talk things over quietly . . . As far as I'm concerned, this is the position. I can't afford to have you go to the police. With my record, it's just not possible. So I'm going to see you don't. I'm going to stay here, and you're going to keep quiet — and you're going to quiet yourself. You're going to get to see me, and you're going to see me again. Is that clear? You won't be the first ones who've done it, if that's any consolation. You'll do it for the same reason the others did — because you don't want to be beaten to a pulp. Because you don't want to see your kids suffer — which is what'll happen if you talk."

"They'll put you in prison," Sally cried wildly. "You'll be there for the rest of your life . . ."

"Don't you believe it," Roscoe said. "They always let you out the end — and I've got a long, long memory. Don't you think you can get out of it? You can get out of it, or you can get out of it, or you can get out of it, and there's no protection in the world could keep your kids safe from me then."

"You're mad!" Mellany said.

"Don't kid yourself, Mellany — I'm as sane as you are. I know what I want, that's all — and how to get it. A short life and a merry one, that's my motto. Take what you want while you can, and to hell with the consequences."

A ring at the door disturbed him — short — long, insistent ring. On the instant, Roscoe's manner changed. He jerked his hand toward the door. "Go and see, Sally — but remember what I said about the kids."

He waited tensely, watching Mellany, while Sally went to the door.

There was the sound of a man's voice in the hall. Mellany listened, straining his ears. Suddenly his heart began to pound. Surely he knew that voice! He did. It was . . .

As recognition came, a great wave of relief flooded over him. Then the sitting-room door flew back with a crash and Sherston came in like a cyclone. His face was apoplectic, his eyes popping, his big fists clenched. He looked completely beside himself, a man obsessed. He didn't even glance at Mellany. His gaze was directed at Roscoe. "Sherston! You are here! I'm going to break your neck. I'll teach you to come pawing at my wife, you filthy goat!"

Roscoe said softly: "Don't force me, Sherston." He was holding his hands low in front of him, like a watchful wrestler. "Don't try to start anything with me. You'll only wish you . . ."

The final words were lost just as Sherston hurled himself on Roscoe in a reckless fury. A wild mêlée followed. The impetus of Sherston's assault had carried Roscoe to the glass door, and then, with two or three fierce, savage, savage, their arms and legs and bodies in constant, violent movement. Then they were half on their feet again, smashing and crashing around the room. Mellany moved toward the phone. Before he could reach it, Roscoe, breaking free, landed a jolting punch at Sherston's weak point, his stomach, and Sherston fell back, writhing in agony.

"I warned you," Roscoe said contemptuously. He seemed to have suffered little damage himself. He was cool, inhuman — one-man gauntlet without a gun. He caught sight of Mellany and took a light step toward him. "Put that phone down!"

Mellany put it down.

Anger! Sherston straightened up and grabbed a massive chair and flung it at Roscoe again. Roscoe side-stepped and punched him twice with scientific strength. Sherston staggered under the blows. Sally gave a gaping cry. Roscoe was going in again. It would be a massacre . . . Suddenly, Mellany grabbed a chair, too. Sherston, from the floor, cried: "Hit him, John — hit him!" Roscoe swayed around. "What, you, too, little man?"

He was diverted, was brief, but he gave Sherston his chance. Now he was free from Roscoe's grip. "Booth together!" he yelled. For a split second Roscoe seemed uncertain what to do. Then he turned on Sherston. Mellany, in a red mist of fear and anger, raised the chair above his head and struck at Roscoe with all his strength. He felt the blow land. Under the impact, Roscoe staggered back. For a moment he stood swaying. Then, with a groan, he fell heavily to the floor against the fireplace.

Sherston went after him in a frenzy, his own chair raised.... But even he could see there was no need to do anything more. Roscoe was lying in a motionless heap where he'd fallen. The fight was over.

Sherston set the chair down and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Thanks, John!" he said. He was still breathing hard from his efforts. "Thanks a lot.... You just saved the day.... He was too much for me."

Mellany had dropped to the floor beside Roscoe. He could scarcely believe, now, that he'd done what he'd done. "Do you think he's all right?" he asked anxiously.

Sherston looked at Roscoe with grim satisfaction. "He will be—he's only knocked out.... He'll be around, soon."

"I'll get some water," Mellany said. He went off rather unsteadily to the kitchen.

"I had to come," Sherston said. "I just couldn't wait to see my hands on him.... Do you know what he did?" He came to the caravan and tried to attack it.

"I know...." Sally said. "Is she all right?"

"I think so," she fought him off....

"He told us he'd been there."

"He told you!"

"Yes," he boasted about it. It's been dreadful here, George, too—we've had an absolutely ghastly time. Thank heaven you did come, that's all. I don't know what would have happened.... He's been holding us prisoner—threatening us—hating John....

"No!"

"It's true.... He was trying to get money out of us—all sorts of things...."

"Why—the thief!" Sherston looked as though he'd like to set about Roscoe all over again.

As though he'd been waiting for an excuse, and a towel and began to dash cold drops into the unconscious man's face. Roscoe moaned a little, but he still showed no sign of coming around. After a moment or two, Mellany said: "We'll have to do something about him, Sally.... Kira will be in soon."

"Why don't we take him upstairs?" Sherston suggested.

Sally shuddered. "No—no—he can't stay here. I don't want the children to see him again. I don't want anything more to do with him."

"I'll ring the police," Mellany said. "They'll take him away."

Mellany nodded. "I guess that's the best thing.... He broke off, freezing down at the propane tank. Roscoe's breathing was sputtering. He still hadn't moved. "You don't think we ought to wait till he comes around, maybe? After all, we did go for him with a couple of chairs."

Sally said suddenly: "John he couldn't have meant what he said, could he—about the children? If we told the police, I mean?"

"I don't know," Mellany said. "But we'll have to tell them in the court. We'll just have to put ourselves in their hands."

"If you ask me," Sherston said, "you folks aren't in a state to make any decision right now. Look, what about me taking him along to the caravan for the night—and we can decide what to do about him in the morning? You'll feel different, I reckon."

"Oh, if only you would...." Sally began—and stopped.

"What about Eve, though?"

"It won't worry her if I sit over him with a spanner! Anyway, I don't think he'll be giving any more trouble—he must have taken quite a crack."

Mellany looked at Sally. Her face was pale and drawn; she was just about all in. "Well, if you're not doing much having him...." he said hesitantly to Sherston.

"I'm sure it's the best way," Sherston said.

"Then we'd better hurry—Kira's due back any minute...."

"It's decent of you to take him off our hands, Sherston," Mellany said. "I do appreciate it. We've had a shocking night."

## CHAPTER V

A SORT of peace descended on the house after that—the peace of exhaustion. Neither Sally nor Mellany wanted to talk about Roscoe any more than night.

Sally was on the point of going to bed when the phone rang. It was Eve Sherston, in a volatile

post-crisis mood. "My dear," she exclaimed, as soon as she heard Sally's voice, "what an absolutely fantastic day! George has just told me the whole story. He says, I think, I'm not to tell anyone else, but what George says it must have been far worse for you.... That man! Are you all right? George says John rallied around splendidly—practically saved his life... you must feel quite proud of him. Anyway, it seems to be all over now.... I can still hardly believe it."

"I know," Sally said, "it's like some horrible nightmarish dream you, Eve—have you really got over your masking?"

"More or less—though I feel absolutely worn out, of course."

"I must have been frigida."

"It was pretty awful. I think he's one of those psychopaths, but George won't have it—he says he's just plain vicious. George thinks he'll get at least five years, and then all the things are tidied up....

"I think he'll get away with it," George says for good," Sally said. "I'm terribly grateful to you for having him, Eve.... Has he given any more trouble?"

"No—we had rather a job getting him into the van, but that's all."

"How are you now?"

"Well, that's actually what I'm ringing you about—George it's a little worried about him. He came around all right, but he keeps going off again. His pulse seems quite good and his color isn't bad, but he is behaving in a rather odd way. George did wonder if we ought to get a doctor at once, but he thinks now it'll be all right to wait and see. And George will probably be quite normal again by then. Anyway, he says, John to know the position—so will you tell him?"

"Of course—he's in the bath at the moment."

Sally frowned into the phone. "I do hope there's nothing seriously wrong."

"Does George—he says it might be a bit awkward explaining. But I'm sure there isn't—you could hardly be any more together than Roscoe.... Anyway, there's the matter."

"All right, Eve—thanks for ringing. I'll tell John—and of course he'll be over first thing in the morning. I hope you manage to get some sleep."

"Me, I'm going to take two little pills and make sure! Good-night, Sally."

"Good-night, Eve," Sally hung up, and went along to the bedroom to tell Mellany.

He looked very concerned. "I don't much like the sound of it," he said. "Do people usually go off again once they've come around?"

"I don't know—I don't see anything surprising about it.... Anyway, John, there can't be much wrong with him if his pulse and color are good, can there?"

"I suppose not—but it's rather disturbing... I wonder if he's going to ring Hamley and take him around there right away?"

"Oh, darling, surely it's better to leave things to George—he's the man on the spot, after all."

"You're probably right," Mellany said.

\* \* \*

It seemed as though he had been in bed for only a few minutes when the telephone shrilled again in the hall. He shot up in alarm, his nerves jangling. He reached for the light switch, but Sally, in her own bed, was dead to the world and hardly stirred. Mellany slipped on his dressing gown, switched the light off again, and went quietly downstairs to take the call there. His heart was thumping.

A ring at that hour could only mean trouble. He snatched up the receiver in the sitting-room, cutting off the devilish din. "John Mellany here," he said.

"John—this is George Sherston." The familiar voice rang rough with agitation. "I'm afraid I've got bad news for you."

"Roscoe...."

"Yes.... Something frightful happened—you'd better brace yourself.... John—he's dead!"

"What?" The word was a long-drawn-out whisper of horror. "I just can't believe it."

"I couldn't believe it at first—I thought he must be in a coma."

Mellany clutched at the straw. "Couldn't he be?"

"No, he's dead as a duck.... no doubt about it." Mellany groaned. "George—why didn't we get a doctor right away?"

"I know we ought to have done—but who the hell would have dreamed he'd go out like that? His skull must be as thin as paper. We're in a bit of

a spot—but we can handle it all right.... Listen, does anyone else know what happened at your house tonight? Did you tell Kira?"

"Thank heavens for that! What about the children—did they hear anything?"

"I don't think so—they slept right through it." "Fine! I've got things pretty well sorted out at this end—I'm taking care of everything. I'd like you to come around, though—we must talk."

"I'll come straight away."

\* \* \*

It took him less than half an hour to reach the quarry through the quiet lanes. A light was burning in the caravan. Eve Sherston was standing in the open doorway, silhouetted against the light as she gazed out. Mellany swung the car in, doused his lamps and limped over to her.

"Hello, Eve...." He glanced apprehensively into the van. There was no sign of Sherston. "Where's George?"

"Over there in the bushes," she said. Her voice had a note of panic in it. "Oh, John, I'm so glad you've come.... He says he's doing the best thing, but..."

Mellany swung around, following the direction of her pointing finger. There was a faint glow from the vegetation near the verge of the road. He crossed the quarry and plunged into the bushes, his hands reaching out to feel his way, his steps close to the road's edge, but well screened from it. He was wading a field by the light of an electric hand lamp set on the ground. There was a long, deep hole at his feet and he was feverishly shovelling earth back into it. Sweat was rolling down his face in streams. He paused for a second as Mellany appeared, said: "Good—man, you're been quick!"

"George—what are you doing?" Mellany cried. "What does it look like?" Sherston said, throwing in another spadeful of earth and roses.

With incredulous horror, Mellany gazed down. Three feet below the surface of the ground he could just make out the death-pale face of Frank Roscoe. The hand on the shovel showed like a dark line. The eyes were closed.... Then a spade of earth covered it.

"Stop!" Mellany shouted. He seized Sherston's arm. "George, are you mad? We can't do this."

"Quiet, man!" Sherston jerked himself free and continued to shovel in the earth. "What else can we do?"

He stopped with horror, Mellany turned away. For the second time that night he felt himself utterly inadequate. Grappling blindly, he stumbled back to the caravan. "Give me a drink, Eve, for God's sake," he said.

She poured him whisky, a stiff shot, and he drank it neat.

"George is mad," he said. "Mad!"

"I tried to stop him, John, but he wouldn't listen to me. He said he knew best.... He made me help him—it was ghastly! John, I'm terrified."

"You're good reason to be... we all have!"

Soon George climbed into the van and pulled the door shut. "Sorry if I was a bit rough out there, John, but I had to finish what I'd started. Okay, I know what you're going to say—I ought to have consulted you first."

"Of course you ought!"

"Well, it's too bad I couldn't, but there just wasn't time for a lot of discussion—I had to use what darkness there was left."

"Why do it at all? We're not criminals. We didn't kill Roscoe on purpose. It was—it was an accident."

Sherston poured himself a glass of water and drank deeply. Then he sat down opposite Mellany. "Now listen to me, John," he said quietly. "I've had a bit longer to think about this than you have, and I reckon I've got the position—a good deal clearer. Of course it was an accident—we neither of us intended to kill him. But I damn well intended to half-kill him if I could, and from the way he was acting for me, I don't think you were exactly friendly. Face it, man—we both hated his guts, and we had good reason to. So what would it look like if tonight's story got out?"

"I don't care what it looks like," Mellany said angrily.

"You soon would! Can't you see we wouldn't have a dog's chance? We both went for him with chains. We didn't call a doctor. Instead, we smothered him out here, and he died. I know there

was a good reason for everything we did, but would anyone else think so? Don't kid yourself! There's not a jury that wouldn't bring it in manslaughter."

"You were wrong," Melianby said. "You've put us both in the wrong—hopelessly. What you've done is not a crime."

"Maybe it is, technically, but not any other way—not morally. Anyhow, why should you worry? I did it on my own. I'm not asking you to take responsibility for it."

Melianby groaned. "God—what a mess!"

"It's nothing like the mess it might have been!"

"You know all about that," Melianby said.

"How do you know the whole thing won't come out? Then where would we be?"

Sherston shook his head. "How can it? Who's to know?"

All you have to do is give out that Roscoe didn't like the Bath district after all and pushed off somewhere else—you don't know where—and that'll be that.

He hadn't any roots here. He hadn't any friends, any contacts. He's got to think so. Who's going to search for him? He came here out of the blue and he's gone back into it."

"It's not as simple as that," Melianby said.

"Everyone leaves traces.... What about his things up at the house—his clothes?"

"Well, you'll have to pack those up double-quick—hide them somewhere tonight and bring them along here as soon as you get the chance. I'll soon get rid of them."

"Anybody somewhere found him? A dog might...."

Melianby freed off, unable to finish.

"You needn't worry," Sherston said. "He's four feet down and well stamped on.... By the time I've finished with the place, there won't be a trace."

Melianby got to his feet. "Well—I don't know.... I'll have to think about it. I must talk to Sally."

"You do that," Sherston said. "Talk to Sally. As for her, she wants her life ruined."

"I'm right—she wants it ruined," John said, opening the door.

"I'm sorry about this, John. You're a man of principle, much more than I am.... I know what it means to you. I know it's a heck of a problem."

All I can say is, I've tried to do my best—for us both. I honestly couldn't see any other way."

Melianby nodded. His face was gray and set.

"I'll come back later, anyway."

"With the clothes?" Sherston called after him.

"And, John—be careful! Watch your step!"

\* \* \*

Sally said, with an effort at calmness: "The thing is, John, what would happen if you told the truth? Do you think I'm being a little worried?"

It was a little while before Melianby answered. On his way back from the caravan he'd had time to do some hard thinking. He had to be honest with Sally, but he hated having to tell her his conclusions.

When at last he replied, it was as though the words were being dragged from him one by one.

"I'm horribly afraid George may be right," he said.

Sally looked at him blankly. "You mean you would be sent to prison?"

"I think it's quite likely," Melianby said.

"But, John, it was sheer bad luck that he died."

"For him and for us?"

"I can't believe a jury wouldn't be sympathetic, all the same," Sally said.

Melianby shook his head. "There's such a thing as forfeiting sympathy. Have you thought what sort of figure I'd cut in the box? Roscoe was a man who'd risked his life to save you and Tony from drowning—I owed him everything—and a few days afterwards I bashed him with a chair. No, Sally, I think we've got to face it—the verdict would be manslaughter, and we'd get anything up to five years."

"Five years! John!"

"It's happened to others. It would just as easily happen to us."

Presently Sally said, in a different tone: "And suppose we keep quiet about it—all what then?"

"I really give the short shrift. Imagine George is probably still alive there, too.... I don't see why Roscoe's body should ever be found."

There was another little silence. Then Sally said slowly: "So it comes to this—if we tell the truth, we probably ruin our lives, and if we don't there's a good chance we can carry on as though...." She hesitated.

"As though nothing had happened?" Melianby said, with rare bitterness.

"No, darling, of course not—I know things would

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never be the same again—but at least the children wouldn't suffer."

"I hate the thought of living with a lie all my life.... I'm not sure I can tell the truth. Honestly, Sally, I don't know what we should do."

There was a little silence. Then Sally said, with deep conviction: "Well, I do, darling—I think we should keep quiet. I know how you feel, and I respect you for it, but I think this is a case where you've simply got to sit on your feelings."

There were sounds on the landing as the figure—Kira's voice, a high-pitched laugh, tripping, the sound of feet. The day had begun. Sally said, in an urgent tone: "John, we've got to decide.... Please!"

Melianby got up from the bed. His face was expressionless. "Very well," he said. "We'll take Roscoe's things along to George and he can dig another hole."

\* \* \*

In the afternoon Sally packed Kira and the children off to the park. Directly they'd gone, Melianby whisked Roscoe's suitcase into the car while Sally kept an eye on the cook and the "dally" in the kitchen.

It was a sombre meeting with the Sherstons. Awareness of the grave in the bushes hung over everyone like a pall. Eve, suffering badly from reaction, seemed a bundle of nerves.

Sherston took Melianby back to the burial place. "I'd like you to see for yourself that there's nothing to worry about," he said.

Deep in the bushes, Melianby gazed down in horrid fascination at the spot. There was no doubt that the body had been buried in a shoddy,业余 job. Where the hole had been, the ground was now quite level, with nothing to catch the eye, nothing at all to distinguish it from the surrounding area.

"Where will you bury the suitcase?" he asked.

"Right here beside the body—it's the only place in the quarry where the ground's soft enough. I'll shove it in just as it is."

"You can't do that, Eve. If you were seen...."

"You bet I'll be careful. I'll wait till it's dark, and Eve will keep watch.... Don't worry."

Melianby nodded again. "What are your plans, George?"

"Well, I thought we'd move on tomorrow—Eve can't wait to get away. Neither can I, for that matter. This place has kind of lost its charm."

"I should think so," Sally said.

"The continent, in the end—but we'll stick around in England till we're sure there's not going to be any trouble.... If anything did crop up, of course, we'd need each other—but I'm pretty certain it won't. I'll give you a ring in a week or two, just to check up with you that everything's okay."

He looked a little anxious at Melianby. "I hope you don't still blame me, John. I know you've got a bit of a grudge."

"No, I don't blame you," Melianby said. "If you'd consulted me, I doubt if I'd have agreed—but I don't know.... There are pressures.... Anyway, that's academic now. I've accepted the position, and I shall go through with it."

## CHAPTER VI

THE Sherstons left the district early next day, after a final telephone call to say that the suitcase had been safely disposed of and to wish Sally and Melianby the best of luck. With their departure, the active phase of the Roscoe affair seemed to be over. There was still plenty to worry about, but nothing more to do. On the surface, at least, the Melianby household reverted to normal.

Then, on the morning of the fourth day, a letter arrived for Roscoe—postmarked "London, N.J." and addressed in a precise and rather elegant hand. It was Melianby who picked it up. With feelings not unlike the foreboding he'd had when the telephone had rung on the fatal night, he opened it and read it. It was a folded sheet of paper.

"Flat 23, Egmont Court, London N.I."

"Dear Roscoe, I was surprised and distressed at the contents of your second letter, which I found waiting for me when I returned here today. The money I gave you was specifically for investment in the company, and as I gather you have not yet closed the deal, it should still be in your possession in full. You certainly had no right at all to use any part of it for your own purposes—which, judging from your evasive tone, I begin to think you

must have done. Indeed, I am now seriously wondering whether the company ever existed, and whether perhaps I was taken in by a smooth talker. The purpose of this letter is to tell you that I expect the return of the £2,000 as soon as possible. I will accept no excuses. If I do not receive your cheque by first post on Friday morning, I shall go at once to the police and ask for your apprehension on a charge of false pretences and fraud. In view of our past relationship I deeply regret this, but you have left me with no alternatives. Charles E. Franklin."

Melianby went straight to his study and dropped into a chair. The contents of the letter had hit him like a blow between the eyes. Since Roscoe's death there had always been a possibility that something awkward might turn up, but the crisis they now so suddenly plunged into was more acute and dangerous than anything he had imagined. It did not occur to him that he could do anything to avert it. The danger had been signalled with that first letter. Roscoe had received, and Melianby blamed himself fiercely for not having given it more thought, once Col. Lancaster had been exposed as an invention. After all, someone had written an upsetting letter. Roscoe's story about Lancaster had been bogus, but his health had been. A crook from top to toe, he had only £7,000 when he could've easily had £10,000 more. And now everything was plain. That first letter, the one he'd so wisely thrown away, had no doubt asked for the money back—or at least for some accounting. Roscoe, desperate to stave off the reckoning, had first come to Melianby with his phony story and his plan to help him when that hadn't worked, he'd resorted to crude threats. The driving force behind his fantastic behavior was suddenly clear.... What wasn't clear was how this new and appalling imminent danger was to be met.

Melianby was still groping for an answer when Sally came in search of him. His withdrawal so early an hour was unusual, and she'd guessed that something had happened. She glanced over his shoulder at the letter. "What is it, John—bad news?"

"Very bad, I'm afraid." He passed it to her. She read it through twice, slowly.

"So he did owe money," she said, in a flat voice.

"Yes."

"And if this man Faulkner tells the police about him, do you suppose they'll bring him here?"

"They're bound to. Straight here. It was Roscoe's last known address."

Sally stared at him, white-faced. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Well, I've been thinking.... Somehow we've got to stop the police coming, and I believe I know how that might be done. I'll have to see Faulkner, and I'll bring you see him today." Benefit, he told Sally what was in his mind. "Is his telephone number on the letter?"

"Yes—Highgate 031."

"Then I'll ring him right away," Melianby said. "If he's a decent chap, it may work."

It was close on 3 o'clock that afternoon when Melianby's taxi drew up outside the modern block of flats in Highgate where Charles Faulkner lived. Flat 23—the porter said he was on the third floor. Melianby walked up, drawing out the last moments before the fateful interview. It wasn't that he hadn't a perfectly clear plan in his mind—the long journey up from Bath had given him plenty of time to decide what he was going to say.

The door was opened by an elderly, rather frail-looking man, with a deeply lined face and snow-white hair. For a moment he inspired violence through the upper lenses of a pair of bifocals. "Mr. Melianby?" he said. His voice was cultured, and much more vigorous than his appearance.

Melianby nodded.

"Do come in, won't you?" Faulkner turned and led the way into a small but pleasantly furnished room, with a large open fire.

"You'll find that chair quite comfortable...." Melianby sat down, with a word of thanks. The old man took a chair opposite him. There was something almost spinstery about his prim neatness, yet in an odd way he had an air of authority. "Well, now—you said you wanted to talk to me about Frank Roscoe. What is it, Mr. Melianby?"

Melianby came straight to the point. "Roscoe has been staying at my home in Bath for a week

or two as my guest," he said. "This morning he showed me a letter he'd just received from you. I gather he owes you £7,000."

"He does, indeed."

"Well, you've come to settle his debt."

The old man blinked. "You mean—Roscoe has sent the money?"

"No, I mean that I should like to pay it for him."

Faulkner stared at him in astonishment. "Why on earth should you do that?"

"It's very simple, Mr. Faulkner. You see, just over two weeks ago Frank Roscoe saved my wife and small son from drowning, at the risk of his own life."

"Really?"

"You'll appreciate that it's put me under an enormous obligation to him. Now I feel I have a chance to discharge the debt."

"Well, this is most surprising..." For a moment Faulkner gazed hard at Mellanby, his eyes averted, his face set in a stern, almost disapprovingly harsh look. "I can understand how you feel, of course—but I'm bound to say I think it would be a most quixotic action. You say he showed you my letter, so you must know my view of him. I'm very much afraid the man's a complete rogue."

"Oh, he's a rogue, all right," Mellanby said. "But in the sort of way that's an additional reason why I'm so anxious to square my account with him. It isn't at all pleasant to be deeply indebted to a rogue."

"No—I can imagine that... But believe me, Mr. Mellanby, he doesn't deserve your consideration. He's a fraud, an unscrupulous scoundrel. He's behaved abominably to me..."

"He's been extremely unscrupulous. But the fact remains that he did me the greatest service one man can defer another—risking, as I say, his own life—and it seems to me the only way I can repay him is to save him—on this occasion, at least, from going to jail. Indeed, I'm committed—I promised him, before he left, that I'd settle his account for him."

"He's gone, has he?"

"Yes. I made the arrangement that he should leave at once, and he cleared off after breakfast. I don't know where he's gone to, and frankly I don't care. It's all been a most distressing business... What I do know, Mr. Faulkner, is that you'll be doing me a service by accepting my cheque and not pressing any charge against him. Then I can forget all about it."

"Well, I'm very reluctant," Faulkner said slowly. "Mind you, I need the money. I'm not pretending I don't, and I certainly shan't get it any other way. But I'm very reluctant indeed."

"You feel he should be punished?"

"I think the scoundrel should be kept-kealed, Mr. Mellanby!"

"I'm asking it as a favor," Mellanby said.

"Well, of course, if you put it like that... It will certainly be a very great relief to me..."

Mellanby took out his cheque book with an inward sigh of thankfulness. Faulkner's relief would be nothing to him. "It's all a question of what one's prepared to pay for peace of mind," he said. "I know very well that if you brought a charge against Roscoe, and he was jailed—however much he deserves it—I should like to make at night time how he'd pulled my wife and boy out of the hole he could have saved him from prison if I'd tried a bit harder. So here's the cheque, and I'm grateful to you for taking it."

"Well—thank you," the old man said. "It lifts a great weight from my mind. If you'll permit me to say so, I think your action is a most generous one..." He gave a wistful smile... "even if it is quite unrecognised!" He held out his knuckly hand.

"Let me assure you neither of us is troubled by Frank Roscoe again."

Mellanby's smile was even more wistful. He had decided himself more than he did at that moment. "Somehow," he said, "I don't think we shall be."

## CHAPTER VII

WITH the settlement of Roscoe's debt, the danger of police inquiries seemed finally to have passed. Even Mellanby could see no further cause for anxiety on that score. A brief note of reiterated thanks and good wishes

which arrived from Charles Faulkner the following afternoon was clearly intended to close the episode.

For a day or two, Mellanby continued to feel a slight uneasiness, which would pick up the dials. There was always the chance that Roscoe had left some unpaid bills in the town, or involved himself in some way that Mellanby didn't know about. Anything like that would mean more explanations, more subterfuge. But his fears proved groundless. No more letters came, and there were no more telephone inquiries. No one even mentioned Roscoe any more. In fact, he was a forgotten man—and so the trail would be.

\* \* \*

There was still a reckoning, though, as Mellanby had always known there would be in the end—the reckoning in his own mind. He had been too numbered with shock at first, too busy grappling with deadly danger later, to allow of much brooding. Now the shock was past, the danger over, and the time had come to assess his position and his memories... From the real truth.

He did his best to cast his thoughts. He argued the case through with himself, over and over, stressing everything he could find in his favor. Determinedly, he tried to take a sensible and balanced view of his deception. On every practical ground, he told himself, Sally and Sheridan had been right. He'd done the best, the most rationalizing, by agreeing to keep off the police. The great weight of the family was safe. The children were happy—they would never know. Sense and logic approved of what he'd done. In the daytime, sense and logic almost prevailed. Sitting in his study, with his work before him and Sally close at hand, and an air of quiet, he put Roscoe from his mind. Immerse himself in town with societies and causes, talking with his friends and colleagues, he could force himself to concentrate. But sense and logic couldn't give him tranquil nights. Will power applied in the wakeful early hours merely left him drained. As the days passed, he found it more and more difficult to get into a real rest. The moment he lay down, thoughts of the many things he'd done assailed him ghastly thoughts. The picture of Roscoe's body rotting in its grave obsessed him. His hands? For the first time in his life he began to take sleeping-tablets—but his brain fought them, so that they always worked too late to do him any good. He began to lose weight that he could ill spare; his face became gaunt; his hair was as though his inner strength was consuming him.

Sally watched him with growing distress and alarm. She had always known that it would be hard for him to forget, but she had never foreseen anything like this. Desperately, aching, she tried to think of some new way to help him. Everything that devoted love could do, she had already done. Daily she tried to bring him back to the living. She had tried several times to go over the events with him again, to lift him out of his morbidity, but she seemed to have lost all power of persuasion. Sometimes she felt that she had even lost contact with him. It was something new in their married life, and it added sharply to her unhappiness. Perhaps she thought, might things be better if they could get away together—some day, suddenly, to do him good: a complete change, a cruise, perhaps, when the children were back at school. Every weekend she took care of them for a week or two. Yet Mellanby seemed so tortured and half-riden that she doubted if anything but time would make much difference.

One afternoon—it was nearly a fortnight after Roscoe's departure—Sally found that he had written a letter to John. He was leaning on the desk with his head in his hands, motionless. At the sound of her entry he jerked upright and guiltily turned the page of the book that lay open in front of him. Sally pulled the letter down, then drew up a chair beside him.

"Darling—we can't go on like this." "But... we've no choice..." "John, you're going to have to go to work to make yourself really ill."

"Well, you don't imagine I'm doing it on purpose?" He saw the look of distress in her face, and put a hand on hers in swift contrition. "I'm sorry... I'm ashamed of myself, Sally. I'm a weakling, I know that. I despise myself for not being able to help you. But I can't... I can't!"

"Darling! Oh, if only I could help you. If only I could understand why it preys on your mind so—why you can't forget. Why should it be so much

worse for you than for me? After all, I urged you on. Or for George? I'm quite certain he's not making himself ill over it."

"I wouldn't have said I was made so differently—I'd have thought I had a normal amount of conscience. But I certainly don't see this as you do. Look, darling, I know we've been over it again and again, but I have to keep on saying it—all you did was hit a man twice your size who was wrecking your home and threatening your children—and attacking George into a pulp."

"And I killed him," Mellanby said. "It was an accident. You didn't even hit him very hard—and anyway I'm not at all sure it was the chisel that hit his head. It didn't look like it to me—he dodged, and I think it was his shoulder that you hit. I think he fell and banged his head on the fireplace—and that was sheer bad luck. Why blame yourself? Heaven's it's not as though you meant to kill him."

"I wanted to kill him," Mellanby said.

Sally gave him a startled look. "Darling, that's nonsense. You probably hated him at that moment, who wouldn't have done? But not in that way... You, of all people."

"I tell you I wanted to kill him," Mellanby repeated. "And not out of hate. It was you don't understand, Sally. I was frightened of him. Terrified. When I picked up that chisel, and you forced it, it wasn't just in anger, or to help George, as it would have been with most men. I did it out of fear—shaken, naked, uncontrolled fear. Fear of his strength, and his viciousness, and his razor threats, and of all the things he might do. I'd only ever thought of myself that moment, and it was to smash him down, crush him, get rid of him, and get rid of just as though he'd been a dangerous snake. God knows it was a pretty painless effort and with ordinary luck he'd scarcely have felt it—but that's beside the point. If ever a man had murder in his heart, I had at that moment."

"At that moment, perhaps—it's not surprising," Sally went pale.

"You hit a man with murder in your heart, and he dies, that is murder."

"It was he who made you afraid."

"It was I who hadn't the guts to keep control of myself. I know what I felt, Sally, and I know she wouldn't worry about it at all, whod think it a natural thing. I wish to God I was one of them—but I'm not. Far ashamed. I've got a complex growing at me day by night, tearing me to shreds... Oh, Sally!"

She put her arms around him. "Darling, you've nothing to be ashamed of—nothing at all. You're not being fair to yourself. You've got more real courage than anyone I ever met. John, whatever he felt, he brought it through it on himself—every bit of it. It was all his fault!"

"He started it, I know. I can argue the case as well as you. But it doesn't alter the fact that I'm going to be haunted for the rest of my life by a feeling of guilt and a squalid secret."

As she looked at him strained, suffering face, Sally knew how illusory this was. She was the security he had striven to preserve. She had been so confident they had chosen the right course—so unimaginatively sure. Now, for the first time, she had doubts. What, after all, was John's physical freedom going to be worth to him, if his peace of mind was shattered? What was it going to be worth to her, watching his torment? What ultimate happiness could there be for the children in haunted houses? And there was.

For a while she sat in anguished silence, scarcely daring to frame the question that was in her mind. Then she forced the words out: "John—do you still want to confess?"

He didn't reply at once. When he did, it was with an emphasis that surprised her. "No—that's impossible now."

"It would be dreadful—but anything's better than seeing you like this."

He shook his head. "After all that's happened, it's quite unthinkable. I'm committed. Apart from anything else, I gave George my word that I'd see through it, and I can't go back on that. It's something I've decided right out."

"You're sure."

"Quite sure. I wasn't leading up to that, Sally,

when I started to talk—or anything like it. I didn't even mean to tell you what was worrying me so

much. It just came out. I know perfectly well that I've got to put up with it—we both have.... Anyhow, perhaps things will seem better now that I've got it off my chest. At least I've confessed to you!"

"Yes, darling," Sally said. "If only I could give you absolute!"

\* \* \*

Then one evening after dinner things changed. Kira had gone out for a short walk. Sally and Mellanby were drinking coffee, reading the papers, and occasionally exchanging comments about the news. Sally had the Daily Mail; Mellanby, pipe in mouth, was browsing through the local paper, the Bath Gazette. It was a peaceful and pleasantly domestic scene.

Then a headline caught Mellanby's eye. He read down the paragraph, frowning a little. Suddenly he gave a gasp of horror.

The item read:

**BLACKETT'S LANE BY-PASS**

Ready by Easter?

"It is learned on authority that plans to divert the main Bath-Bathurst road through Blackett's Lane and by-pass the village of Eversleigh are to be advanced by several months. The decision to expedite the work has been taken following renewals protests by Eversleigh residents over the mounting toll of accidents in the narrow village streets. Some preliminary work in the lane, involving the widening of the bridge, has already been done and is to be expanded to complete the whole scheme by Easter. The lane, in its new form, will be 30 feet wide and, like the main road, will have a cycle track on one side and a footpath on the other. The Gazette understands that Blackett's Lane will be closed to all traffic from Sept. 15 until its reopening as a by-pass next year."

\* \* \*

"They'll find him, of course," Mellanby said. Sally finished reading the paragraph and slowly put the paper down. Her face was ashen. "They might not. John.... How deep do they dig when they make a road?"

"I don't know— I expect it varies.... But deep enough!"

"More than four feet?"

"At least that's what I should think, in a case like this— maybe more. A main road to take heavy traffic—would have to have tremendous foundations."

"Perhaps they'll add all the width on the other side—away from the quarry."

Mellanby shook his head. "For a 30-foot road and two paths they'll tear the whole place up.... They're bound to find him. The body's so close to the verge, there isn't a chance."

"That's right!" Sally burst out.

"George said it was the only place soft enough to dig—and naturally he wouldn't think of the lane being widened.... We ought to have done, though—we knew about it." Mellanby gazed fixedly at his wife. "Sally.... we're in a frightful mess. They'll discover everything. It'll be the end of us...."

Mellanby got up and began to pace about the room. Slowly, his expression hardened. "If they find the body..."

Sally stared at him. "But I thought you said...."

"Sally, I'm in this thing up to my neck—almost literally!" The situation can't get any worse. We were probably wrong to try to hush things up, but we made the decision and now we've got to go through with it. There's no road back—and I'm not going to give in. I'm going to dig Roscoe up and bury him somewhere else!"

"John!"

"I know! It's unspeakable! The mere thought turns my stomach. Well, it'll just have to turn.... I'm going to do it, Sally. It's the only way."

Sally sat frozen with horror. Her whole being revolted at the prospect—it was worse than anything she'd ever imagined. There must be some alternative. But, as try as she might, she could not find one.

"Yes—I suppose it is the only way...." she said at last. "But, John, oughtn't we try to find George, first? He ought to help—and it would make it easier for you."

"I would. I agree—but how would we start?"

"Perhaps we could get the A.A. to look for him. You'd have to think of some reason why you needed him urgent, that's all."

Mellanby considered for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think we can afford to wait for

## THE GOLDEN DEED

George—if he's camping in a quiet spot like the quarry it might take ages to find him. We just haven't the time."

### CHAPTER VIII

**E**ARLY next morning Mellanby drove alone to Blackett's Lane. He had driven a little time ago, but he had pushed the light covering of leaves aside with the iron ferrule of his stick as experienced eye at last picked out the tell-tale traces of disturbance—a slight upward bulge, an unfilled crack, the faint impression of a heel. The place was three or four yards from Roscoe's grave. Mellanby had come in contact with a large stone so that he would be able to find it more easily at night. Then he started to prospect around for an alternative site.

Back at the house, he reported the results of his reconnaissance to Sally, and they discussed further arrangements. It would be unwise—and unfair, they agreed—for them to go out secretly at night without telling Kira. Mellanby had the idea of and was anxious to. It would be better, Sally suggested, if they said they were going to dine out and go to friends afterwards, and might be back late. It was a little after 11 when they reached the lane. Driving along it, Mellanby kept an eye open for possible parked cars, but the place seemed quite deserted. Once in the lane, with the lights off, he felt somewhat unsure. They could hear the wind, which subsided but determined, took up a position in the lane a few yards from where Mellanby would be digging. Mellanby had already donned gum boots and brought the tools over to the bushes. He quickly found his marker, hung the electric lamp on a branch so that its diffused light was thrown downwards to the ground, and started to dig.

It was hot, and the ground was soon sweating freely. The need for speed was in his mind all the time and he toiled without resting. The soil, though recently disturbed, had been closely compacted by George's heavy tread, and it had to be hewn out in great lumps. It was nearly half an hour before Mellanby's spade struck the resilient top of the suitcase, more than four feet down. It took him another half-hour to free the case, for he had to remove the soil from the bottom and the sides and elbow room to get at it. But at last it was out, and he stood back with a grunt of satisfaction.

"All right!" Sally said. It was almost the first word she'd spoken for an hour.

"Yes, I've got it.... I'm going to fill in now." Filling was easier, but it had to be done with care. As long as the soil was still damp, though, there was no obvious sign of digging anywhere. Mellanby shovelled and stamped, scraping in the last of the loose soil. When the ground was level he swept leaves over it again and drew the brambles across and obliterated his footmarks by the light of the lamp. Then he picked up the damp suitcase and the tools and joined Sally. The time was just after 12.30.

Together they carried the case and tools and lamp to the old man. There was no cover over the man's arms, bosom, and Mellanby told Sally to keep an especially careful lookout. She returned to the lane and mounted guard again and once more Mellanby started to dig. He would need to hack out a trench about five feet long by three feet wide to get to the necessary depth. A slice of moon was just beginning to show above the trees, and the moonlight was dim. Mellanby had dug about a quarter of the way when his hands began to tremble. His muscles were aching now. His hands were blistered.... That wouldn't do, he thought—someone might notice. Tomorrow he must wear gloves.... Tomorrow! This was bad enough, but tomorrow would be infinitely worse.... Still, they were making progress. No point in dwelling on horrors to come. At last it was done. In silence they left the quarry.

As they entered the house, Sally began to wonder if Kira would wake. If she did, they would have to say they had had a car breakdown.... John, with the marks of his digging still on him, would have to keep out of the way. Very quietly she turned the car into the drive with the headlights off and let it trickle to a stop. There was no sound from the house. She entered the stealth of darkness. No one called out. Evidently they were going to be all right. Mellanby went straight upstairs to clean himself up in the bathroom. By the time Sally joined him, he was getting into bed. Five minutes after that he was asleep.

It was after 9 in the morning when Mellanby was wakened by Sally's voice and the clink of a cup. He heard her himself, muffled, muffled, stiffly. Sally was sitting in her dressing gown, pouring tea at the little table between their beds.

"Hello, darling," she said. She gave him an affectionate though rather wan smile. "Well—do you feel better for your six hours' sleep?"

"I ache a lot more!" he said. He took the cup she handed to him, and gratefully sipped the hot tea. "Have you seen Kira and the kids?"

"Yes."

"Any comments?"

"They hoped we had a lovely time! Kira didn't hear us come in—so everything seems to be under control so far."

"That's a relief.... Do you sleep all right?"

"Not really.... I took a nap after we got off." Sally gave him an odd look. "As a matter of fact, darling, I'd no sooner closed my eyes than I had the most extraordinary thought.... I've been longing for you to wake up so that I could tell you."

"Well, I'm awake now—just about!"

"John—you remember when George rang you up that night, and I tell you that Roscoe had died? And how you said the phone call was it before you reached the caravan?"

"Oh—altogether about three-quarters of an hour. What's all that leading up to, Sally?"

"John, do you realize that, not counting interruptions, it took you nearly two hours to dig out that new hole last night, working at top speed?"

Mellanby stared at her. "Well...."

"Well, that's the thought that kept me awake. During if George was telling us the truth, he had much less time to dig a much bigger hole—a full-sized grave—and get Roscoe's body into it, and start filling it in again, before you got there.... Could he have done it?"

A look of puzzlement settled on Mellanby's face. Slowly, he shook his head. "No, I don't think he could have done it."

"He's very strong, of course."

"Even so, I can't see him doing it. It would have taken him quite a while to find a suitable place. Then he had to go and phone me, and get back. And he was digging in a tougher spot than I was." Mellanby shook his head again. "I'd say it was absolutely impossible. He's not that strong."

"I don't see it in. If we're right, it means that Roscoe must have died before George said he did, and George must have got on with the digging and not told you about the death until the grave was almost finished!"

"That seems incredible!"

"What other explanation can there be?"

"But it doesn't make sense.... After all, he didn't say he'd be home until he'd finished.... I just as easily have turned to and helped him dig."

There was a little silence. Then Sally said: "Well, darling, facts are facts, aren't they? If what you say about the digging is right, that's what must have happened. Unless, of course, you're prepared to consider an even worse alternative."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"If Roscoe died when George said he did, then George must have started digging the grave when Roscoe was still alive?"

Mellanby said: "What a horrid suggestion!" He looked appalled. "That can be ruled right away."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Sally said. "We don't really know George very well, do we? We don't know where he's been staying."

"We know him well enough for that, I should think." Mellanby gazed at her incredulously. "Why, it would have been deliberate murder—just as much as if George had gone in to Roscoe and hit him with a spanner."

"Perhaps he did just that!"

"Sally! You haven't any right...."

"I've as much right as George had to keep the truth to myself," Sally said stubbornly.

"You haven't the right to fight frightening accusations like that around."

"Darling, I've been thinking about this for hours. I'm not just talking wildly.... Look, you said yourself that digging the grave without telling you about the death wasn't natural—and I agree. If George had merely been concerned with the safety of both of you, he'd have had the decency to tell you that he'd been digging."

"If he'd suspected that Roscoe might die, and hadn't had anything more on his conscience than what happened at this house, he'd have called a doctor right away, if only for his own sake—anybody would. So that isn't the explanation, either."

But if he'd deliberately flinched Roscoe off himself, then that would account for his not phoning you, and for his frantic haste to get the body buried. Doesn't you realize there'd been marks on the body he wouldn't want seen?

"I know," I mused, "there was an uneasy silence. Then Mellany said, 'Well, you have a point there, I suppose. But there's not a scrap of evidence to support it.'

"Isn't there? Didn't George keep on saying that Roscoe wasn't fit to live—even after the fight was over and Roscoe couldn't do any more?"

"That's a different thing from killing him."

"Well, I think he meant it. He killed Roscoe much more than you did, you know, and in a far more violent way. And there was almost no risk—George would know you'd have to co-operate with him afterwards, because you thought you were in it, too."

"I was in it," Mellany said. "It was I who hit him. It was my pure imagination."

"I don't think it is—I'd say everything has up. I think it's quite possible you've been blaming yourself all this time for something you never did."

Mellany still looked unconvinced. "I can see what you're trying to do, Sheriff, and don't you think I'm not being reasonable? You can't take the load off, and God knows, I'd be only too thankful if you could—but I'm afraid it's not going to work. The fact is, you're really thought all this up because you wanted to."

"That's not true, John—not entirely, anyway. . . . Surely you agree there's a case?"

"Yes, there's a sort of case, I suppose—but aren't you overlooking something rather important?"

"Why, Eve, of course . . . I thought you liked her a lot . . . Can you see her co-operating in a diabolical thing like this?"

Eve took sleeping pills that night," Sally said quietly. "She wouldn't have known & thought about it."

## CHAPTER IX

MELLANY was silent over breakfast. He still considered Sally's idea fantastic, but he found it impossible to dismiss it from his mind.

There was one significant point, of course, that Sally hadn't even mentioned. Sheriff had been willing to take Roscoe to the emergency. Strangely willing, perhaps, after all that had happened. He'd actually suggested it . . . It might have been no more than the considerate action it had seemed—but it might have been the eager recognition of an intended victim. On the whole, Mellany thought, a point against Sheriff.

"I'll have to go along to try to find the caravan," Mellany said to Sally, finally.

She gave a little sigh of relief. "Yes, I'm sure it's the thing to do . . ."

"You may be right or wrong about Sheriff—I don't know—but one way or the other it should be possible to settle the matter . . . In any case, I want to do it quickly."

"I should think so . . . J. Let's hope we're not too late, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it occurred to me—if George was responsible for Roscoe's death, he's hardly likely to have stayed in England. He may be hundreds of miles away now, and we'd never find him."

"I rather doubt that," Mellany said. "With the caravan, anyway—theerry boats are always pretty well booked up at this time of year."

"Perhaps so . . ."

"Anyhow, we should be able to check that quite easily with the motoring organizations—there can't be many caravans crossing."

"Do you remember the number of George's car?"

"I've got it somewhere—I made a note of it when Roscoe was stuck in the lase with the caravan."

"That's lucky! John, what exactly will you say if we can't find him? It's going to be rather awkward, I think."

Mellany looked grim. "It could be very awkward, I think . . . We'll just have to take it a step at a time."

"Starting where?"

"Well, I'll begin by telling him about the crisis we've had to face—Faulkner's letter, and now the road widening . . . They'll seem perfectly good reasons for going after him . . . I'll tell him about my

digging last night, and what a time it took. Then I'll switch to his effort, and say I'm puzzled. He'll have to give me an explanation to that, I suppose."

Sally put her hand on his arm. "Darling—what about tonight? Can't we leave it for a day or two, now, and see what happens?"

Mellany's face grew grave again. "I don't think we'd better risk it, Sally. We don't know how soon the workmen may descend on the place—and it's very much our worry."

It took Mellany only a very short time to discover from the two motoring organizations he belonged to that neither of them had issued foreign touring documents for the Sheriffs' caravan or car in the past week or two. It was just possible, he realized, that Sheriffs had sold them or stored them, or had given them to go to him without them, but unless he'd had some special cause for alarm, it seemed unlikely. The odds were great that he was still in the country—and Mellany now faced the more complicated problem of finding him. First, he put another call to the organization with the more extensive network of road patrols.

"It's a bit difficult," he said. "I think he's gone abroad, so if I'm right he'll still be around somewhere—touring, I imagine . . . Is there any chance you could help me trace it, do you think? It's a matter of the greatest urgency."

It was at the other end was friendly. "Is it a case of a foreign tour? If so, a little-a-class matter would probably do better to get in touch with the BBC—they might put out an SOS for you."

"No, it's not that sort of thing," Mellany said. "It's a business matter. George Sheriffs, the owner of the caravan, is an associate of mine, and it's absolutely vital I get in touch with him right away."

"It's a question of a big foreign contract . . ."

"Never mind, I'll pay all expenses. In fact, I'd be quite prepared to drop in a blank cheque at your area office."

"Oh, I hardly think that would be necessary. Have you any idea what part of the country Mr. Sheriffs might be touring in?"

"That's just the trouble—no . . . He was here in the Baden-Powell, in August, and then he went off into the blue . . . He could be anywhere—Wales—Scotland . . ."

"I see . . . Well, what's the caravan like?"

"Oh, it's a big one—more than 20 feet long. I think I should. I can't tell you the make, but it's quite a sturdy job."

"What color is it, sir?"

"Cream."

"H'm—it's a popular color . . . What about the car?"

"A black saloon—very smart and new."

"That sounds more hopeful . . . There was a little pause, and the official said, "Well, Mr. Mellany, we'll do what we can for you. We shall have to get in touch with our area offices, and they'll have to pass the word through to the patrols. If your friend is using the main roads, one of our chaps is bound to pick him up before long . . . It may take a day or two, of course."

"I realize that," Mellany said. "I'm sure you'll do what you can for us, Mr. . . ."

"We'll get on to it right away, sir—and the moment we hear anything we'll ring you."

"I'm most grateful," Mellany said. "I'll be standing by . . . He hung up. After a moment he put in a call to the other organization.

\* \* \*

Their day was completely overshadowed by the macabre task ahead of them. Five o'clock came. In another 30 minutes, they'd be off. Mellany felt sick thinking they'd arranged to leave early.

At that moment there was a vivid flash of lightning, and a roll of thunder that shook the house. Almost at once it began to rain. As he gazed out on the drenched scene, Mellany knew that, for this night, at least, they had worried unnecessarily.

Presently he came and joined them at the window. His face was stern and weary. Mellany had never seen them like this. "The best-laid schemes o' mice and men . . ."

He nodded grimly. "We couldn't go now, even if it stopped right away—and it's obviously not going to. We'll just have to put it off till tomorrow."

"Perhaps it's Providence," Sally said.

The storm raged till late in the evening, and then slowly died away. By morning the weather had turned again, and a touch of autumn in the air—the grouse was still so wet that Mellany thought they'd probably have to wait another 24 hours or so before they could move

the body.

The telephone rang. Sally was taking the call as she was sitting in the room. She broke off as he entered, said, "Hello, Mr. Mellany," and handed the receiver over. It was one of the motoring organizations.

"Hello, Mr. Mellany," the friendly official said. "Well, we've got a bit of news for you—we think we may have located the caravan. Tell me, is your Mr. Sheriffs a big man of about 50, with a young, good-looking wife?"

"That's right."

"We've found him. He's not too far away from you, either—he's in the Forest of Dean, in Gloucestershire."

Mellany threw a swift glance at Sally. "Why, that's fine! My word, you've been quick."

"Oh, we had a real stroke of luck, sir. It seems that one of our Gloucester chaps was actually stopped by Mr. Sheriffs near Cinderford yesterday afternoon—your friend wanted to know the way to the Forest of Dean, and the chap who directed him when he got back from patrol last night and read the message we'd sent out, he remembered the black car and the cream caravan and reported them. He wasn't sure of the registration number—that's why I asked you to confirm the description. Anyway, there seems no doubt about it now—and I don't think you'll have any more difficulty. Your friend was obviously missing for the sake of it. You can get over there right away you should find him."

"I'll do that," Mellany said. "Where exactly is this place?"

"It's near Berry Hill, about a mile and a half north of Coleford on the way to Symonds' Yat. There's only one site in the Forest, so you can't make any mistake."

"Good."

Mellany joined down the directions. Mr. Mellany, just in case the caravan has left."

"That's very kind of you. I really am most obliged for all you've done."

"Not at all, sir. Always glad to help a member."

"I'll let you know what happens. Don't forget to send me your account."

The official chucked. "We won't, sir. Good-by."

Mellany hung up and turned to Sally, who'd been excitedly following the conversation beside him.

"Well, there we are! It looks as though the show-down with Sheriffs is going to be sooner than we thought. . . . Come on, let's go to Gloucestershire!"

They were away before 11. Sally took the wheel. Mellany, whose leg had been giving him a bit of trouble since the arduous digging operation at the quarry, sat beside her with the road map on his knee.

He was beginning to feel a little better about things, too, for a great weight had been lifted from his mind. He had never expected that Sheriffs would be here so quickly—all his plans had been based on the opposite assumption. Now it looked as though they might be seeing him in a couple of hours.

They reached Coleford soon after 12 and quickly found the minor road that led to Symonds' Yat. Now tension had returned to the car, for they were very near the destination, and it wasn't necessary to take the way to the Forest. Instead they caught the gay sounds of people on holiday, and a moment later Mellany spotted the notice—National Forest Park Camping Ground.

They drove around twice. By then, Mellany had examined every van and car—and he knew they'd had their journey too far. The Sherstons weren't here.

He really looked very crestfallen. "I suppose he changed his mind and didn't come after all. What a wretched anticlimax!"

"Perhaps he came, and left again," Mellany said. "Let's go and ask at the bungalow." They parked the car and walked up to the house.

The warden was friendly, and as helpful as was possible. "They had a room here, sir—he—he remembered the car, and he had a record of the number. It had been parked before the pavilion, next door to the blue-and-white van they could see—but it had stayed only the one night. He had no idea where it had gone."

Mellany thanked him, and they turned dejectedly away. They were back at the beginning again, now, the same morning, nothing to do but telephone the motoring organizations and tell them the hunt was still on. Then Sally suggested they should have a word with the owner of the blue-and-white van, in case he knew anything, and they walked over

to it. A bald, plump man in a pair of very tight shorts was playing ball with an equally plump youth on the grassy bank beside. From the man's face came an expression small and the sound of trying.

Mellany waited till the ball had come to rest, and then addressed the man. "I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but we're looking for some friends of ours—a man and a woman with a cream caravan and a black car. We understand they were here last night."

"That's right," the man said. "They were our neighbors—very nice people. They left this morning."

Mellany nodded. "They didn't happen to say where they were thinking of going next, did they?"

"As a matter of fact, they did," the man said. "This site was a bit too lively for them—they said they were going to some place on the other side of Monmouth—had not a camp, I gather—just a quiet place to stay."

"Did they mention the name of the place?"

"I believe they did, but I dashed it if I remember it now. Something 'Wood,' wasn't it, Dennis?" The youth looked vague. "A Welsh-sounding name. Just a minute, let me get my map."

The man disappeared into the caravan. Mellany and Sally eyed each other anxiously. In a moment he was out again, a small, square-faced young man in the duster, which he opened out on the grass. For a few seconds he studied it. Then his finger pounced. "That's the place—Trefant Park Wood. . . . I knew it sounded Welsh."

Mellany bent over the map. A few miles to the west of Monmouth, and seven or eight from where they were, a large area of green was shown. Trefant Park seemed to be the name of the whole area. He looked at Sally. "Well, I suppose we'd better go there."

It was nearly 1 o'clock when they stopped straight down at the entrance to Monmouth. The total area of Trefant Park Wood was nine or 10 square miles. The ground was undulating, with a highest point of about 400 feet. Not all of it was wooded—white patches on the map indicated open spaces in the interior. The place was completely girdled by a minor road, which seemed to be the obvious starting point for the search. From the road a dozen or so decent carts went off into the woods—the whole place appeared to be very sparsely inhabited. They were going to need, Mellany thought, a lot of luck.

It took them an hour to make the circuit. Repeatedly they stopped, to inspect promising but half-concealed sites beside the road, or to seek information at the scattered cottages. By mid-afternoon they had given up all trace of the van.

It was in the late afternoon, when they had almost given up hope, that they found what they were looking for. There was the caravan.

Sally stopped the car. She looked as though she couldn't quite believe it. Mellany, with a grant of satisfaction, examined the caravan through the glasses.

"Can you see them?" Sally asked.

"Not a sign—but if the car's there, they must be."

She reached for a cigarette, and lit it. "How do you feel, darling?"

"Pretty keyed up . . . ?"

"So do I. I wish they hadn't stopped in quite such an isolated place."

"What? . . . You're not expecting Sherston to get violent, are you?"

"I shouldn't think so—though if he did kill Roscoe . . . ?"

"If . . . I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Sally. We'll find our way, and go easy on accusations to start with. If you do get a chance, take Eve off her own back and find out what she remembers. We'll decide the next step when we've compared notes . . . All right?"

"All right, darling."

"Then let's go!"

## CHAPTER X

**A**S Sally braked beside the car, the caravan door opened and Eve Sherston looked inquiringly out. For a moment the just stared at them, her expression as blank and unwelcoming as though they'd been complete strangers. Then she smiled. It was the familiar fascinating smile—but

## THE GOLDEN DEED

this time you could almost hear it click on.

"Well, of all things!" she exclaimed. She turned and ran into the caravan. "George, it's the Mellanbys!"

Sherston appeared in the doorway beside her. He, too, looked pretty blank. "Why, hello, you two . . . this is a surprise . . . !" His tone grew heavier. "Nice to see you again—do come along in . . . Funny thing, we were saying only last night it was about time we rang you. How did you manage to find us?"

"It wasn't too difficult," Mellany said. "We got the motoring people to help—and you left quite a good trail . . . How are you both?"

"We're fine, thanks—been enjoying a good rest. Well, what about a drink to celebrate?" He reached tentatively for a bottle from the table. There was whisky and soda. Mellany saw, and four clean glasses were out on a tray.

"We're expecting some friends along later," Sherston explained. "Nice young couple we met in Gloucester the other day—but they won't be here yet . . . Will you have something, Sally?"

"No, thank you," Sally said. "It's a bit early for me."

"And for you?" Mellany said.

"Sur—Oh, well . . ." Sherston looked hard at Mellany, seeming suddenly to notice the seriousness of his manner. "Nothing wrong, is there?"

"As a matter of fact," Mellany said, "there is. Things have been going wrong ever since you left. . . ."

"Oh, lead—bad news, eh? In that case, I think perhaps I'll have a drink, if you don't mind." Sherston poured himself a sizable whisky and drained it neat. After a moment he gave a wry grin. "Right—now I'm fortified . . . What's the trouble, John?"

Sally looked on the table. She was leaning forward with her arms on the table, listening intently. There was a small, dark, rectangular object on the table.

Mellany said slowly, "Well—the first thing that happened was a letter from a man whom Roscoe had defrauded of £47,000."

Sherston's jaw dropped. "No . . . ?"

"We were pretty shaken ourselves," Mellany said.

"I'm not surprised . . . Do you mean the letter was to you?"

"No, it was to Roscoe. From a man named Faulkner. There'd been some correspondence between them and he knew the address."

"What did the letter say?"

"said Faulkner was going to put the police on to Roscoe. I knew we couldn't risk any inquiries. So I told Faulkner and paid him the £7,000 to keep him quiet. I said I was doing it out of gratitude to Roscoe."

"Good God!—that was pretty drastic . . . Wasn't there any other way?"

"I couldn't think of one."

"Well . . . ?" Sherston looked utterly taken aback. "Why on earth didn't you get in touch with me right away?"

Mellany shrugged. "I had to move quickly—it was a question of hours."

"I see . . . Well, I'll pay my share, of course, if you don't mind waiting a bit. I may say it seems a lot of money to throw away—but I can see your problem."

"That wasn't the worst problem," Mellany said grimly. "We learned a few days ago that the crooked are getting a wilder place in London. They're bound to break up the verger and if Roscoe's body is still there when they do, they'll find it."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Sherston sat very still. Eve's lovely complexion had turned blousy.

Sally said, "Eve, wouldn't you like to come out for a bit while they talk about it? It's so horrible!"

"I want to . . . I want to hear . . . When are they going to start, John?"

"Almost any day now."

"What a pile of lousy luck!" Sherston said. "Who'd ever have thought of that kind of thing? A narrow lane that leads nowhere . . . !"

He broke off, his face dark. "Well, we'll have to get to work again, that's all—move the body to a new place." "Sally and I have already moved the suitcase," Mellany said quietly.

"What?" There was a sharp note in Sherston's voice now—sharper and more apprehensive as though the situation seemed to warrant, unless he had some secret sense of guilt about the man in the grave.

"Sally and I have already moved the suitcase," Mellany said. "We'd no idea it would be so easy

to find you—we thought we'd better go ahead on our own . . . It was quite a job, we spent the greater part of the day on the road."

Sherston had quickly recovered his poise. "I really am sorry about this, John—you and Sally have been carrying the whole thing on your shoulders . . . Anyway, I'll take care of the body—you needn't worry about it any more . . . I can easily manage it on my own."

At that he felt almost sure now. "With a glance dig much faster than I do," he said. "You certainly dig much faster than I do."

There was a moment of silence. Then Sherston said, "I should—I'm a good bit stronger . . ."

Mellany shook his head. "I don't think that was it . . . In fact, I know you couldn't have done it if you tried."

Sherston ran his tongue over his dry lips. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything—yet. I'm merely asking you for an explanation."

"There's nothing to explain. You're wrong—that's all."

"I'm quite sure I'm not wrong. It's something I happen to know about."

Sherston shot a glance at Eve, avoiding Mellany's eye. He said nothing.

"Of course," Mellany went on, "one explanation could be that Roscoe was in a much worse state than I thought. Perhaps you knew he was going to die, and dug the grave in readiness?"

"Now on the whole I don't think I do. There could be another explanation. Perhaps you killed him because you hated him."

"You must be out of your mind!"

"Well," Mellany said, "it's something we shall have no difficulty in checking up on where we move the body. When we moved it, Sherston—you and I. We knew he was dead, but did him kill, there's almost certainly be marks."

Mellany waited. He hated the role of inquisitor.

"I've been afraid this might happen, ever since the night . . . I thought you'd probably realize there hadn't been time for the digging . . . You're quite right, of course. I did kill him," said Sherston.

There was a little gasp of horror from Sally. Eve, wild-eyed, looked up. "He didn't mean to, Sally," she said. "No," Sherston said. "I didn't mean to. I hated him—more than anyone I've ever met—but I'd never have done that . . . You've got to believe me, John."

"What happened?"

Sherston took a long breath. "It was just after midnight. Eve had taken her tablets and was asleep on the bed over there—dead to the world. I settled out here, and was on the end of the bed, and the end was half-concealed in the shadows. Then, suddenly, there was a noise, and I looked up, and he was coming out, crazy-eyed and lurching a bit, with his hands raised in front of him. Well, he caught hold of me, and we struggled. He wasn't as strong as he had been, but he was still strong. I managed to get him back into the end room, and he was still there, trying to get out. He was like a wild animal—I knew he'd kill me if I let him the chance . . . I was fighting for my life, John. When I suddenly felt my hands at his throat I gave him all I had . . . The next thing I knew he'd begged, and I saw that he was dead. And that's the whole truth . . . I killed him—but I swear to God I never intended him to die. I was simply defending myself."

"And then you think I killed him," Mellany said, in a flat voice.

Sherston gave a shame-faced nod. "It was a lousy trick, I know . . ."

"It was unspeakable," Sally said with passion. "How could you?"

"The way I saw it, I had no option. When you're in a real jam you think about yourself first of all. Anyway, there it is—the whole stupid truth. Now it's your turn. If you give me away, I'm finished, of course. Nobody will believe me now that I didn't do it on purpose. It'll mean jail for life."

Mellany passed a weary hand over his face. "What about Eve? You told her about it, I suppose? She was a party to the trick?"

"Yes," Eve said, "I knew. George woke me and told me what had happened, after Roscoe was killed. He told me what you were going to do, and I agreed to take all my share of the blame. I was frightened. I didn't think you'd believe him, either, John. I'm sorry . . . I know how you must have worried."





